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COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The Power To Transform Race Relations

By Dr. Spencer Kagan

Since I published my first study of co-operative learning in 1968, I have been researching, developing and training educators in these methods. With regard to race relations, that work has led me to a simple conclusion: Cooperative learning, when it includes heterogeneous teams and team-building, is the single most powerful tool this nation has for improving race relations. Let's examine the evidence behind that conclusion.

Numerous studies of the impact of cooperative learning on social relations and race relations have shown consistent outcomes: Following cooperative learning, students are generally kinder and more cooperative, and race relations improve dramatically.

Let me briefly describe a study that demonstrates this. As a research professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, I was examining the effects of cooperative learning in desegregated schools. I was given the opportunity to test the effects of randomly assigning all the student teachers in the school of education to one of two conditions: to teach using cooperative learning, or to teach using traditional methods in which students worked alone.

To study the impact of these two different instructional approaches on race relations, my research team developed and validated a race relations measure: the Interpersonal Relations Assessment Technique, or IRAT. The IRAT is very simple: In a column on the left side of a single sheet of paper is a list of all the names of the students in a class. Across the top of the paper are six items, varying in degree of intimacy. Low-level intimacy items include "sit next to" or "loan a pencil." High-level intimacy items include "best friends" and "share secrets."

The items were chosen because they have Gutman scale properties. That is, students who are willing to sit next to someone may or may not be willing to be their best friend, but if they are willing to be a best friend, they also will be willing to sit next to that person. The result is an intimacy scale. (Interestingly, the validation study revealed that "sharing secrets" is a more intimate item than "being best friends." That is, students are not willing to share secrets with everyone they list as a best friend!)

We ended up testing about 2,000 students at all grade levels, asking them to respond to the six intimacy items for each of their classmates. This sociometric approach generated a mountain of information — over a third of a million bits of data.

What did IRAT reveal? The results were as clear as any I have ever viewed in social science research.

When taught with traditional methods in which students do not work with others, in the first few years of school, students are color-blind. That is, they choose their friends, even best friends, without regard to race.

By late 2nd grade, however, self-segregation begins. Students begin choosing classmates of the same race as friends more often than classmates of other races.

By the end of elementary school, self-segregation is dramatic; it becomes almost a prerequisite for the highest levels of friendship for students to be of the same race. Such self-segregation is obvious not just on the IRAT; it can be seen as well by observing group patterns on the playground or in the cafeteria.

This pattern of progressive self-segregation along race lines is true everywhere traditional teaching methods are used. Understandably, when students do not work with and come to know others of different races, they are more comfortable with members of their own race. Desegregation does not necessarily lead to integration.

Our study showed that when student teachers implemented cooperative learning, an entirely different picture emerged. In the cooperative learning condition, pupils were assigned to four-person heterogeneous student teams, integrated racially. That is, if there were black, Hispanic and white students in a classroom, to the extent possible, teams would be formed so there was a black, Hispanic and white student on each team.

Further, when students first sat down as a team, they engaged in team-building: Students created team names, logos and cheers. They learned to work together toward common goals.

With these simple methods in place, and after only six weeks, the IRAT revealed an entirely transformed pattern of race relations; students chose their friends across race lines almost as often as within their same race. Self-segregation along race lines was almost completely eliminated by cooperative learning. Students who do team-building and who work together toward a shared goal come to honor and appreciate their diversity. They don't just tolerate each other; they come to like each other.

The studies of cooperative learning demonstrate that we have it in our power to eliminate one of the greatest problems facing our nation. We can realize one of the most powerful dreams ever articulated: We can become a nation of citizens that judge others not by their color, but rather by the content of their character.

Dr. Spencer Kagan is a former clinical psychologist and a former professor of Psychology and Education at the University of California. He has published more than 75 scientific books, book chapters and journal articles focusing on cooperative learning. Learn more at www.kaganonline.com.