

Cooperative Learning & the Gifted Separating Two Questions

Spencer Kagan

Almost 20 years ago I published an article asking educators to separate two questions: 1) Should gifted students be in separate classes? and 2) Is cooperative learning good for the gifted?¹

The motivation for the article was that at that time there was a war going on with developers of gifted programs attacking cooperative learning. The basis for the war: Cooperative learning, which is based on heterogeneous groups, was being used as a rationale for de-tracking, including integrating gifted students into mainstream classrooms.

Earlier I had been asked to be a keynote speaker at the National Gifted Association.² Friends told me I was crazy to accept. I was to speak before a couple of thousand educators of the gifted (as opposed to gifted educators) who hated cooperative learning —“They are going to eat you alive!” was the most frequent comment.

Actually the talk went well because I asked people to separate the two questions. It turns out whether or not gifted students are in segregated classrooms, cooperative learning is good for them.

Jackie points this out well in her post. Jackie’s article drew a lot of attention so I thought the attached article might be of interest as well.

(By the way, in answer to the first question (Can we justify the existence of programs for the gifted?), in the article I raise some ethical questions I feel have never been answered adequately. Can we really justify spending extra resources on the subset of students who score very high on IQ tests? The students labeled gifted are one of the groups that probably least needs special resources to succeed. There are other groups more in need. Any group we spend extra resources on will benefit, so why one group over another?)

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¹ Kagan, S. “Cooperative Learning and the Gifted: Separating Two Questions.” *Cooperative Learning*, 1994, 14(4): 26-28.

² Kagan, S. Cooperative Learning and Gifted Children. *National Association for Gifted Children’s Annual Convention*. Los Angeles, CA. November 6, 1992.

Cooperative Learning and The Gifted: Separating Two Questions

by Spencer Kagan



About the Author

SPENCER KAGAN directs Kagan Cooperative Learning, a company dedicated to creating and distributing the best of cooperative learning resources in the form of books, videos, manipulatives, and workshop training opportunities. Spencer develops the structural approach to cooperative learning, and many original structures, including *Pairs Compare*, *Numbered Heads Together*, *Three-step Interview*, *Three Pair Share*, *partners*, and *Co-op Jigsaw*.

TWO QUESTIONS

The educational community has not adequately separated two distinct questions. 1) Should gifted students be grouped into special programs for the gifted? 2) Is cooperative learning good for the gifted? Unfortunately, these two distinct questions have been blended into one question: Which is better for gifted students, homogeneous gifted programs or heterogeneous cooperative learning? This blended question creates a false dichotomy which sets cooperative learning up as the enemy of gifted programs. In fact, when we ask questions one and two separately, we discover CL is a friend of gifted students and that gifted programs also benefit from cooperative learning.

QUESTION 1: SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR THE GIFTED?

A full examination of the merits of various programs for gifted students is beyond the scope of this brief paper. The following are a few facts and points to ponder:

EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

On the narrow empirical grounds of improved academic achievement for the gifted, support exists for a wide range of grouping plans for the gifted, including pullout and resource room programs; Saturday and summer classes; accelerated classes; advanced placement courses; and special schools (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Numerous studies, however, show that simple tracking *without* enhanced or specialized curriculum (simply sepa-

rate classes in each grade for the high, middle, and low achieving students) does not improve the achievement of any group (Slavin, 1987; 1990; Kulik & Kulik, 1992).

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL PROBLEMS

Enhanced curriculum could benefit all students, and students in gifted programs may achieve better for a wide range of non-curricular reasons such as peer norms, parental pressures, and CL instruction common in gifted programs. Among the ethical questions: Are the academic gains purchased for gifted students in enrichment programs worth the price of elitism and increased segregation along ability and race lines? Is it morally defensible to support programs which benefit high achievers more than average achievers, rich more than poor, whites more than minorities, and students talented in the usual academic definition of achievement more than students with other talents?

EXCLUSIVE GROUPING = LOST LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

If gifted work only with other gifted, they can formulate a distorted self-concept because their comparison levels are skewed. In a class of all gifted students the lowest achieving student in the class may feel inadequate. If that same student at least occasionally worked in a heterogeneous cooperative learning team, s/he would have a greater probability of building a healthy, reality-based self-concept.

Further, exclusive grouping of

gifted decreases their preparation for a world of increasing diversity: Our demographics are shifting dramatically in the direction of increased diversity of race and culture, and over their lifetime gifted students, like all students, will work with others from with a wide range of backgrounds and values. Their success in part will be a function of their ability to understand, accept, and work with diversity – skills acquired in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups.

QUESTION 2: COOPERATIVE LEARNING FOR THE GIFTED?

There is a range of abilities in any classroom and heterogeneous CL teams can be formed in even the most homogeneous gifted classroom. Thus, whether or not gifted and high achieving students spend time in special programs or regular classrooms, we can ask Question Two: "Do gifted benefit from cooperative learning?" The answer is yes.

GIFTED PROGRAMS INCLUDE COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Those who develop programs for the gifted recognize the need for coopera-

tive work. Most of the instructional methods widely used within gifted programs include substantial implementation of some form of CL (Betts & Knapp, 1980; Feldhusen, 1980; Renzulli, 1977). Eight of the fifteen most well-known models for gifted explicitly recommend group work; an additional three contain group work (Renzulli, 1986).

POSITIVE CL OUTCOMES FOR THE GIFTED

Improved Social Relations. Ask teachers of the gifted in what area their students are having the most difficulty. Generally they will talk about social relations and social acceptance. These problems are a function of traditional, competitive educational structures which pit students against each other. If only five students are to have their papers posted or read, and the gifted student is always among them, other students will correctly perceive that the recognition always afforded the gifted student decreases their own chances for recognition. Class members in this situation set up peer norms against very high achievement. If a gifted student does not cave in to this peer pressure the student is labeled a "geek," "nerd," or "brain," paying the large price of social isolation for giftedness or high achievement.

Increased Achievement. Some of the highest ability students in traditional classrooms choose to hide their ability rather than become a social outcast. When those students are then placed in an enrichment or accelerated class, social ostracization is no longer associated with high achievement and gifted students show remarkable achievement gains. Importantly, if CL is used in the regular classroom, high achievement is met by peer approval rather than peer rejection, and gifted students are freer to blossom.

Increased Social Skills. There are a host of social skills which are learned in CL. Students learn to paraphrase, take the role of another, solve problems which demand cooperation for solution, resolve conflicts, praise, en-

courage, and help others. Task-related skills are also acquired: students learn to keep a group focused on a task, assess the need for and assign task roles, summarize and evaluate group progress, and work cooperatively. Gifted students, like all students, need these learning opportunities.

Leadership Skills. Many gifted students have the potential to become leaders. Whether that potential is realized or not is less a function of academic achievement than of success in developing the skills of working with others. To inspire confidence, to convey a vision, to unite others who would otherwise tug in different directions, and a host of other leadership skills is only obtained while working with others. If we do not place our gifted students in CL groups, how will they develop their leadership potential?

Higher Level Thinking. Higher level thinking is developed to a large extent as an individual interacts with someone holding a different information base or point of view. An individual working in isolation tends to maintain her/his point of view or way of orga-

nizing data. When interacting with a different point of view or when presented with data which does not fit his/her conceptual framework, students, through the collaborative process, are pushed toward a higher level synthesis. High achieving and gifted students are challenged by teammates – remember, in a heterogeneous team of four, the second student comes from the top half of the class.

Technological Shifts. Workplaces are shifting toward greater interdependence. As gifted students work in interdependent cooperative teams, they are preparing for the workplaces of the future.

Self-Esteem & Other Goodies. Considerable research demonstrates that CL leads to a host of positive outcomes, including increased self-esteem, improved classroom climate, ability to take the role of the other, an internal locus of control, and liking for and being like by classmates. There is no reason to assume that these positive outcomes do not obtain for gifted students in cooperative learning as well.

(continued)

PARENTAL CONCERNS: GIFTED AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Would my gifted student be better off in a gifted program or in a heterogeneous CL group?

Gifted students can benefit from gifted programs, but whether or not they are in a gifted program or a regular class, they benefit from CL.

Will my high-achieving student do all the work in a cooperative project?

In well-structured CL, each student is held accountable for his/her contribution. No one student can do the work for others.

Will my high-achieving student get a lower grade because he/she must work with lower-achieving or unmotivated students?

In well-structured CL, group grades are never used. Individual grades are based on individual performance; reflecting what individuals have learned, not how well their group has performed.

What will my gifted or high-achieving student get from CL?

There are a host of positive outcomes which can only be obtained if students work together: social skills, leadership skills, communication skills, higher-level thinking challenges, a respect for and ability to work with diversity, and an understanding of skills necessary for success in interdependent work situations. High-achieving students especially need CL as many will become leaders of diverse work groups in the future.

Questions & Challenges

IN SUM

Educators of the gifted have developed many excellent programs. In the recent scurry to de-track, some of these programs are facing the chopping block. The rationale often provided is that heterogeneous, cooperative learning is a better solution. When cast in these terms it is natural for parents and teachers of the gifted to see the choice as Cooperative Learning vs. Gifted Programs. Cooperative learning is then viewed as the enemy of the gifted. In fact, questions regarding the merits of gifted programs are independent of the question whether cooperative learning is good for the gifted. Whether gifted students are in special programs for the gifted or in regular classrooms, they benefit in a variety of ways from spending some of their time in well-structured cooperative learning activities. If the mission of schools includes providing for all students opportunities to hone higher level thinking skills, develop leadership skills, and prepare students for a multi-cultural, interdependent world, we must provide cooperative learning for the gifted. ✍

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