COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN KINDERGARTEN: CAN IT ENHANCE STUDENTS' PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR?
Bette Chambers
Centre for the Study of Classroom Processes
Department of Education
Concordia University, Montreal,
Quebec, Canada.

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INTRODUCTION.
Changes in family life in North America are altering children's lives. Couples are having fewer children, which reduces the amount of sibling interaction. More families have both parents working, reducing the amount of parent–child interaction. Families are more transient, reducing extended family and neighbourhood support systems. Children who in the past would have learned communication, negotiation and cooperation skills at home from family members no longer have as much opportunity to do so. This means that more of the responsibility for teaching interpersonal skills falls to day care centres and schools, where opportunities for learning social skills exist. This research studies the influence that engaging in cooperative activities has upon young children's prosocial behaviour.

This research builds on the developmental work in the Piagetian tradition. Piaget's work on egocentrism has influenced North American research and education considerably in the past two decades. While he believed that young children become less egocentric through interaction with others, he also felt that they could not decentre adequately to collaborate with one another (Piaget, 1932). Thus most of the cooperative learning strategies that have been developed, have been designed for use in grades three and above. Recent research that has addressed children's perspective-taking ability calls into question the Piagetian stance on this issue (Abrahams, 1979; Hughes & Donaldson, 1983) finding that young children possess superior perspective-taking skills than were previously believed.

Possessing a particular ability does not guarantee that an individual will employ that ability in one's daily interactions. The translation of the ability to take another's perspective into positive social behaviour...
depends on many antecedents, such as motivations, capabilities and contexts. One must perceive another's need, interpret those needs accurately, recognise that the other can be helped, feel capable of providing assistance and lastly perceive that any cost or risk involved will not be prohibitive (Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). There are many methods of assessing prosocial tendencies; some experimental (Denham, 1986; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977); some naturalistic observations (Zahn–Waxler, Iannotti, & Chapman, 1982). This research employs a naturalistic observational method of observing children’s free-play behaviour.

In a classroom that is structured such that students are busily engaged in their own individual tasks, there will be little opportunity for children to practise their emerging social abilities. However, in a classroom where there are frequent tasks that require student collaboration, the opportunities for demonstrating role-taking skills are increased. The coordination of activities with peers requires children to think about their cognitive and social processes (Musatti, 1986). Investigators from the Child Development Project (CDP) have designed a longitudinal program to enhance the prosocial behaviour of children from elementary schools in California (Solomon, Schaps & Battistich, 1988).

Some research has shown higher levels of prosocial behaviour when participating in cooperative activities. When children participate in collaborative studies they demonstrate increased altruism (Hertz-Lazarowitz, Sharan & Steinberg, 1980). Orlick (1981b) found that kindergarten children were more apt to share candies that they had received in class with children from another class after they had participated in a cooperative games program than children who participated in a traditional games program.

Why have the developers of the structured cooperative instructional strategies taken the Piagetian perspective and developed cooperative instructional techniques for children above the age of eight, when recent research on perspective taking shows that younger children do possess role-taking abilities? Cline (1979) states that it is very difficult to develop reasonable measures for implementation in nursery schools because prosocial behaviours occur so rarely. Is this due to the inability of preschoolers to interact positively or is it a reflection of the way the classes are structured? In our endeavour to develop the child’s independence, we structure preschool classes so that most of the activities are individualised. The few times during the day when children are grouped together, it is the teacher who is the focus of attention. The interaction that takes place is mostly teacher–child interaction and is qualitatively different than interaction between peers (Goodlad 1984).

Even early investigations of Parten (1932) with 2 to 4 year olds, demonstrated that young children were capable of collaboration, she had two categories of behaviour which involved cooperation–associative play and cooperative play. Interaction with another provides feedback to the individual about one's behaviour which enables one to reflect upon this and modify future behaviour (Forman 1981). If perspective-taking ability develops earlier than was previously believed then cooperative learning strategies could be employed with younger children.

A study by DeBellefeuille (1988) of two kindergarten classes showed only two cooperative activities during one month of observations. A few researchers and early childhood educators have designed some cooperative activities appropriate for early childhood settings (Chambers 1990; Hendrickson & Freedman 1980; Cooper 1986; Hill & Reed 1990), but very little research has been conducted on the use of cooperative learning below the 2nd grade, therefore the effects that it has upon young children is impossible to determine (Slavin 1987). This research begins to fill the void.

Throughout this study a strict definition of cooperative learning was employed, namely a learning activity that required the interaction of two or more children to be completed. While this may seem quite restrictive, the reason for it is that there are many opportunities for children to interact in typical kindergarten classrooms, but not all children take