



# Action Research Monograph

**Pennsylvania Action Research Network [PAARN]  
1996-1997**

**Monograph Title:**

**Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?**

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A Section 353 Project of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education

*This monograph is a result of a Learning From Practice project developed by the Pennsylvania State University and Stairways, Inc. under support from the U.S. Department of Education, through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education; however, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and no official endorsement is inferred.*

**“Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?”**

**Practitioner-Researcher: Mary Jeannette Kelly  
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**ABSTRACT**

This action research project explored the use of cooperative learning\* within the classroom as a means of improving retention rates in G.E.D. programs. Would encouraging cooperative learning among adults pursuing a high school diploma increase retention percentages within the G.E.D. program? Student response to cooperative learning obtained by two surveys, staff observations of the class, and a class- by- class journal recording my own class- to- class responses revealed an overall acceptance of cooperative learning by G.E.D. students. Prior attendance records (1992- 1996) verified an overall increase of student retention for this G.E.D. session. Still, because of the many variables affecting adult learners, a second study is recommended to reinforce the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a means of bettering G.E.D. student retention.

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**The Problem:**

As a G.E.D. instructor for six years, student retention has been of a major concern. Prior to substantiating retention percentages, I was aware that about half of our original enrollment would drop out of the program before its end. Unable to predict or control outside factors in students' lives (i.e., transportation, family complications, work demands, etc.) I focused instead on classroom environment. Again, based upon my instructor experience, I noted an overall lack of self- esteem in classes that often resulted in student discouragement and consequent "dropping out" of the program. However, in a former and particularly successful G.E.D. group, I had noted greater interaction among these students than witnessed in most classes. These students not only problem- solved together without instructor intervention, but built a support

system among themselves as well, eliciting encouragement and building self-esteem. This group of students were rarely absent, completed the G.E.D. course, and passed the state exam. Could I artificially produce a similar classroom setting by utilizing cooperative learning? Cooperative learning, as used in this paper, shall be defined as: a non-competitive learning environment in which—two or more students work together to evaluate, understand, and utilize information in shared problem-solving. Certainly such a setting would encourage interaction among students, and student led learning would perhaps present a less threatening environment than the traditional teacher- led instruction wherein the teacher often becomes just one more "authority figure" in the student's life. It seemed that students encouraged in their progress by peers, students raising their self- esteem were more apt to complete the G.E.D. program.

The 14 G.E.D. students participating in this action research project were all Susquehanna— County residents. Sponsored by the Susquehanna County Literacy Council, this 12- week program is held both in the fall and spring. Each session is scheduled for 100 hours of instruction, running for two hours per class, Monday through Thursday. This project elected to study the Spring session which began this year in March and ended shortly after Memorial Day, 1997. While the students ranged in ages from 17 to 61, the average student profile was that of a female 29.8 years of age, who was unemployed and head- of- household. Average high school grade completed was 9.5. As determined by the Pennsylvania Adult Education Locator test, the average verbal score for this group of students was 21.4, while the average math score was 16.8. A perfect score for this test is 50, thus giving our average student a 76.4% grade overall. Three males and eleven females comprised the original enrollment of the Spring 1997 semester of this G.E.D. class.

### **The Intervention:**

Dwindling attendance is often evident early on in G.E.D. classes. Conversations with— other G.E.D. instructors from other programs, as well as feedback from other county G.E.D. programs as communicated to our office, confirm that high retention in these adult programs is a problem. State retention rates from a Pennsylvania Department of Education study (1992-1993) showed a 44% completion rate in the G.E.D. program. Such reflection and statistics

demonstrated that we are not as successful in helping as large a number of students obtain their G.E.D. as we'd like. If students invested not only their time, but also attempted personal commitments with other students in the class, then perhaps completion of the 12-week course would be more realistic. It was my hope that with students teaching students and students discovering that they were capable of learning with little teacher intervention, their place would be secured in the G.E.D. program for its duration. Students might develop a support system through classroom interaction that would also provide an avenue for problem-solving in their personal lives, problems which frequently plague attendance and follow-through within the G.E.D. program. Realizing these goals of increased self-esteem and personal commitment to other students ideally would increase student retention.

Students noted benefits to cooperative learning within the first few weeks of classes. A survey distributed in my fifth class utilizing the group setting generally reflected positive responses. Responses to the question, "Do you like working in groups?" included the following: "It's easier to work in groups... makes class go faster..." "It helps if I don't understand something." "You can learn from other people." Such answers were typical of student feedback. I was satisfied that, while attendance varied among students, all students still attended some classes.

During my first meeting with the students, I explained the concept of cooperative learning and my hope to incorporate it in the classes I instructed. (Of the five subject areas tested for the G.E.D. diploma, I teach Writing Skills and Literature and the Arts. Two additional instructors are responsible for the instruction of History, Science, and Math). Student reaction was generally one of apprehension and doubt. None of the students had been exposed to a classroom setting other than the traditional teacher-as-lecturer method. None of these students knew each other before enrolling in this class.

In determining student group composition, it was my original goal to place students in groups of three to four students with one student in each group whose subject area skills were high. These stronger students were selected according to student scores obtained through pretests in the Writing Skills area. In the original group of 14 students, four students scored better than 80% in the Writing Skills pre-test. Each of these four students were to be the "nucleus" for a student group. What I did not foresee was the problem of student absences. Varying student attendance meant varying student groups. This may, however, have benefitted the cooperative learning process. Working with

a variety of partners offered new perspectives and new acquaintances. Of the 14 students responding to Survey A, only one felt that changing members within a group adversely affected the learning process.

Generally, I introduced new material to the class as a whole, utilizing text and white board examples. When students and I were satisfied that they understood the basis of the material, they were then asked to separate into groups where they utilized cooperative learning to solve problems compiled from their own work, to complete workbook exercises, and/or to use games that reinforced the night's lesson. Students would ask other questions and check each other's progress. Before moving to the next lesson, I asked students to realistically evaluate their comprehension of the new material. Students would remain in their groups throughout the remainder of the class.ÃD.

The baseline used for this project included attendance records for the Spring sessions of 1992 through 1996. Comparing figures from each year's initial enrollment to the number of students still participating six weeks into the program established a percentage of retention. Because of the Action Research Project deadline, data from the last six weeks of this G.E.D. instruction could not be included in this study. The success of cooperative learning as an intervention to increase retention in G.E.D. classes was measured by comparing the average retention percentage computed from the previous five years' Spring attendance records with this year's retention percentage. My goal was to increase this retention percentage by 15%. Intervention success was also measured by responses to student and peer surveys. If student response to cooperative learning was predominantly positive and if retention increased by 15%, then the intervention could be considered successful. To consider the intervention of cooperative learning unconditionally successful would, in this case, be premature. Because data collection was terminated before the last scheduled G.E.D. class, the impressive increase in retention as demonstrated by this Action Research Project would not necessarily reflect a similar retention at the end of May. Too, because cooperative learning was implemented in but 33% of the G.E.D. classes, one might question if cooperative learning had sufficient impact to encourage retention of students, or if this was simply a particularly dedicated and motivated student group.

### **The Documentation Tools:**

Aside from previous attendance records, a class-by-class journal, student surveys, and a peer response gave a record of student reaction to cooperative learning.

### **The Results of the Intervention:**

As previously noted, student response to learning within groups was, for the most part, favorable. Surveys completed during the fifth and eleventh classes (of the twelve class sessions) both revealed that students favored cooperative learning. Of the eight second surveys returned, only one student stated that learning in student groups was not effective in learning new material. Fifty percent of the students responding to the second survey "often" received encouragement from peers, and 50% of this group said that they "sometimes" received encouragement from their peers. (In retrospect, a pertinent question to include in the survey would have been, "Does working with other students help your classroom attendance?") While students seemed to note benefits of cooperative learning, teacher/peers rated student self-esteem from very low to satisfactory. When asked if students tended to work together, again responses varied. The math instructor stated "no," while the program coordinator said, "Seems like they do, especially math class."

Perceptions of how the students viewed themselves and of how the instructors viewed the students were widely divergent. While all students felt that cooperative learning could "often" or "sometimes" be utilized in all G.E.D. subject areas, the other two instructors rarely or never employed cooperative learning. Initially, students seemed reluctant to move into a group setting, but by the fifth class I no longer noted this reluctance. By the middle of the 12-week instruction, I noted students problem-solving together without my intervention. Two students with sporadic attendance did not feel that cooperative learning was beneficial in learning classroom material; I attribute this negativism directly to their lack of exposure to cooperative learning.

### **Reflections on the Intervention**

According to the criteria for success, the intervention of cooperative learning was successful as a means of raising retention rates in our G.E.D. Spring classes. The average retention percentage computed from the previous five year's attendance records for the same period of time was 57.3%. This April,

the retention of the original enrollment of 14 students is 85.7%. The second survey demonstrated that 87.3% of those students completing said survey felt that cooperative learning was "often" or "sometimes" an effective learning tool. Consequently, cooperative learning as a means of improving retention can be viewed as a successful intervention. Personal observations substantiate the benefits of cooperative learning. While I noted varying degrees of interaction within the student groups, my general evaluation was that students were comfortable with each other and "on track" with assignments. Although this group of students seemed more reserved than students in former G.E.D. classes, I observed an increasingly relaxed class atmosphere. Because of changing group composition, students appeared at ease with each other regardless of group composition. Thus, quantitative data (increased retention) as well as qualitative data (journal, student and peer reflection) indicates that criteria for success was met for this project.

A second phase of this project would address problems and/or questions that arose in the project's first phase. Future intervention might include more student commitment, perhaps in the form of an informal agreement among students to regular attendance when at all possible. Utilizing this group-centered learning in other areas of G.E.D. instruction—might further reinforce student commitment to the program. Furthermore, I feel that an opportunity for student socialization prior to the initial use of student groups might lessen the stress and reluctance that I first sensed among students. This might be achieved through informal, non-competitive games or perhaps a pre-class party. Finally, it would only be logical to follow the class to its completion to reassess retention rates rather than assess halfway through the program. It might prove to be beneficial to interview the students more frequently about their progress and assessments of the intervention.

Successful student retention is key to successful G.E.D. graduates. To retain these students in our G.E.D. programs, motivation is necessary. It appears, based on this study, that cooperative learning might be one means of motivating and consequently retaining a higher percentage of students in the G.E.D. classroom. Creating more student commitment to the program through more extensive use of cooperative learning, utilizing more student involvement in constructing and assessing a cooperative learning structure, and incorporating a study to include data throughout the program's duration might prove beneficial in a second phase of this project.

## Appendix

### Student Survey #1

1. Do you like working in groups? Why or why not?
2. Does the instructor give you enough information on the subject before moving you into groups?
3. Does changing partners within a group affect its effectiveness?
4. What suggestions do you have for making learning in a group setting more effective?

### Student Survey #2

Please take a few moments to consider then answer these questions about cooperative (group) learning. Please check just box for each statement/question. [Often, Sometimes, Never]

1. Does working in student groups make learning new material easier?
2. Do you ever use collaborative learning in another instructor's class? (Check all that apply).

History

Math

Science

3. Do you think collaborative learning could be successfully used in other sections? (Check all that apply).

History

Math

Science

4. I prefer working in a group setting.
5. I am more comfortable asking another student questions than the instructor.
6. Working with other students gives me confidence about my knowledge of the subject.
7. Working with other students shows me different ways of approaching and solving problems.
8. Other students encourage me in my classwork.
9. Issues NOT relating to class are discussed in student groups.
10. I receive encouragement/support in issues outside of the classroom environment.
11. If I miss a class, I can depend on someone in my group to give me the work that I missed.
12. Working with other students has helped me to know more people in our class than I would have without the group settings.
13. Have you ever used this type of learning before this class?

14. Have you tried this type of learning Elsewhere

15. Do you feel differently about cooperative learning now than you did when we first began working in groups? Explain.–

Please add any additional comments - negative or positive - at the bottom of the page. Thank you for all of your help.

### Peer Survey–

April 22, 1997

To My Colleagues: Could you P- L- E- A- S- E take a moment and respond to this survey fro my PAARN project?(Merci beaucoup)

1. Do you ever pair or group students to work together in class?
2. Do students tend to work together even if you have not specifically requested they do so?–
3. Do students seek each other's opinions and/or explanations in your class? Before consulting you for instruction?
4. Does there seem to be a unity among students? If so, does this camaraderie seem more obvious with this group than with former groups?–
5. How would you rate the overall self- esteem of this group?

### G.E.D. Retention Rates

Spring 1992	March 1	12 students
	April 30	8
Spring 1993	march 1	13
	April 30	8
Spring 1994	March 7	20
	April 30	13
Spring 1995	march 1	23
	April 30	10
Spring 1996	March 4	14
	April 30	7
Spring 1997	March 3	14
	April 22	12

## From Early March Registration

1992	66.7%
1993	61.5%
1994	65.0%
1995	43.5%
1996	50%
Average 1992-1996 = 57.3%	
1997	85.7%