

*Promoting Achievement and Peer Relationships in Middle School*

I've never taught middle school, but I'm certain that it's a difficult job. Consider what's at stake. Middle schools have to help their young students learn as much as possible, so they'll be prepared to succeed in junior high school, high school, and beyond. At the same time, the quality of students' relationships with each other must also be considered, because peer relations promote individual development, health, and well-being. How can middle school teachers and administrators optimally balance these goals? Are there approaches to middle school education that work better than others? If so, what are they?

A team of psychologists at the University of Minnesota set out to answer these questions in a most powerful way. They performed a meta-analysis, a research method that meaningfully summarizes the results of dozens or even hundreds of prior studies that have all examined the same issue. Drawing on eight decades of educational research, which included over 17,000 middle school students from 11 different countries, the team was able to compare three distinct approaches to schooling.

In *cooperative* approaches, students worked together in pursuit of mutual goals or joint rewards. In *competitive* approaches, students' performances were pitted against each other, resulting in winners and losers on a particular task. Finally, in *individualistic* approaches, students worked alone or with a minimum of social interaction. Would a specific approach - cooperative, competitive, or individualistic - be best for promoting academic achievement? Would a specific approach be best for promoting peer relationships? And, is there any chance that the same approach would be best for promoting both of those educational goals?

As it turns out, the answer to all three of these questions is "yes." A cooperative approach to middle school education, in which students combine their resources and work together towards mutual goals, consistently led to better outcomes in both student achievement and peer relationships. It seems, then, that these two important educational goals are not incompatible, and that a cooperative approach to middle school education actually promotes high-quality academic achievement and peer relationships simultaneously.

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