The Jigsaw Classroom

by Mark Katz, PhD

CAN SCHOOL BE A PLACE where all children—including those with ADHD and other learning challenges—feel they belong and have something important to contribute? Proponents of the jigsaw classroom say it can. And, according to its chief architect, social psychologist Elliott Aronson, they can cite over thirty years of social psychology research to prove it.

Jigsaw traces its roots to Austin, Texas, when in 1971, Aronson, then a professor at the University of Texas, was called upon to assist local schools to reduce racial tensions. Schools in Austin had recently been desegregated, and racial tensions were running high. Fights between African-American, Hispanic and white students erupted in schools throughout the city. Hoping to transform the prevailing social climate, Aronson, along with several of his graduate students, devised a strategy that changed the rules for succeeding at school.

Instead of competing with classmates for good grades, students would start having to depend on them. They would have to learn to value each student's unique expertise, and fellow students would have to learn to value theirs. Students may not have liked each other, but if they wanted to succeed at school, they would need each other. The strategy worked. In time, it reduced racial tensions and helped children learn to accept, appreciate, and value racial, ethnic, and other differences. It created friendships and emotional bonds between children who previously viewed each other with suspicion and mistrust. The results even surprised Aronson.

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How the jigsaw process works

To incorporate jigsaw, teachers begin by dividing students into small groups of five or six children. Groups should be diverse—ethnically, racially, and also academically. Next, teachers choose one child to serve as group leader, ideally a child with good leadership skills who can also serve as a good role model for the jigsaw process. The academic lesson is then divided into five or six parts, with each student assigned a part.

In a lesson on World War II, for example, one part might involve the events leading up the war, another part the role of the allied forces, another part the atrocities Hitler committed during the war, another part on the war's end and the immediate events that followed. These five or six parts of the lesson, when effectively weaved together, provide a coherent historical narrative. Each child is then assigned the responsibility of becoming an expert on his or her part, along with the responsibility of teaching other members of the group about his or her area of expertise. All children know that they will eventually be tested to see how much they learned about World War II. To get a good grade they need to master more than their specific part. They need to master all of the other parts as well.

To become an expert on their "puzzle piece," children enter into expert groups comprised of others in the class who must master that specific piece. Using the World War II illustration, there would be an expert group researching events leading up to the war, a group researching the role of the allied forces, and so on. Teachers work closely with expert groups to insure

that children master their part. To become an expert some students will need more coaching than others, some less. The goal is to insure that when the child arrives back into the original group, he or she has the information the group needs to successfully complete the lesson. Children are provided ample time while in their expert group to rehearse their presentations until they feel confident in teaching it others.

Once the experts feel prepared they then return to their group to teach fellow group members about their unique area of expertise. Eventually all the children are quizzed to see how much they learned from one another. Being tested on the material quickly gives children the message that what they're learning from others and what they're teaching others is very important.

During the course of the year, teachers shuffle groups so children have a chance to bond with other classmates. Children learn that the friendships they formed with those in their original group were not as unique an experience as they may have thought. New groups eventually bring new friendships, along with more experiences of academic success.

Developing empathic understanding

As a replacement behavior for bullying, aggression, social isolation and rejection, few behaviors can compare with empathic understanding. Research shows this to be a common byproduct of the jigsaw experience. Children grow more understanding of and empathic toward other children in their class, and often develop friendships with children with whom they would normally not socialize. Studies also show that when the jigsaw classroom (cooperative learning) is replicated as intended, children master academic material as well as or better than when similar material is taught in more traditional ways.

For some children, school can be a very threatening and dangerous place. Unfortunately, it's usually a tragedy that awakens us to this reality and motivates us to take action. In recent weeks the national media reported several tragic events, some resulting in student suicides, all related to bullying at school. In past issues, *Attention* has highlighted several effective school-based models capable of improving the social climate at school, among them the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program covered in the December 2009 issue. It seems timely to cover Jigsaw, a strategy whose benefits have been observed even when it is implemented for only one hour a day.

Readers interested in learning more about this cooperative learning technique are encouraged to visit jigsaw.org. The website includes specific steps toward implementation along with common barriers and ways to overcome them. Elliott Aronson's book, *Nobody Left to Hate: Teaching Compassion after Columbine* (W.H. Freeman, 2000), presents a more in-depth understanding of the history of the jigsaw classroom and empirical support for its implementation.

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