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from: Johnson, D.W., R.T. Johnson, & E. Holubec (1994).  
*The New Circles of Learning*. Alexandria, VA:  
Association for Supervision and Curriculum  
Development

## Cooperative Base Groups

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Cooperative base groups are long-term cooperative learning groups with stable membership whose primary responsibilities are to help students provide each other with support, encouragement, and assistance in completing assignments and hold each other accountable for striving to learn. Typically, cooperative base groups (1) are heterogeneous in membership (especially in terms of achievement, motivation, and task orientation), (2) meet regularly (daily or biweekly), and (3) last for at least the duration of a class (a semester or year) and preferably until the students are graduated. When students know that the cooperative base group will stay together until each member is graduated, they become committed to finding ways to motivate and encourage their groupmates. Problems in working with each other cannot be ignored or waited out.

The activities for base groups can include:

- *Academic support tasks* such as checking to see what assignments each member has and what assistance is needed. Members can give each other advice on how to study and "survive" in school. They can prepare each other to take tests and go over the questions missed after the test. And they can share their areas of expertise (such as art or computers) with each other. Above all, members monitor each other's academic progress and make sure all members are achieving.

- *Routine tasks* such as taking attendance or collecting homework.

- *Personal support tasks* such as listening sympathetically when a member has problems with parents or friends, having general discussions about life, giving each other advice about relationships, and helping each other solve nonacademic problems. Teachers may increase the likelihood of personal support through trust-building exercises, such as having members share their favorite movie, a childhood experience, a memory, and so forth.

Base groups can be used two ways. The first is to have a base group in each course. Class base groups stay together only for the duration of the course. The second is to organize all students within the school into base groups and have the groups function as an essential part of school life for at least a year and preferably until all members are graduated.

## Class Base Groups

The larger the class and the more complex the subject matter, the more important it is to have class base groups. Base group members should exchange phone numbers and information about schedules so they can meet outside of class if they wish. At the beginning of each session, class members meet in their base groups to:

1. Greet each other and check to see that none of their group is under undue stress. The two questions to discuss are: "How are you today?" and "Are we all prepared for this class period?"

2. Check to see if members have completed their homework or need help and assistance in doing so. The questions to be answered are: "Did you do your homework?" and "Is there anything you did not understand?" If group members don't have time to help each other during the base group meeting, they can make appointments to meet during free time or lunch. Periodically, the base groups may be given a checklist of academic skills and asked to assess which ones each member needs to practice.

3. Review what members have read and done since the last class session. Members should be able to give a brief summary of what they have read, thought about, and done. They may come to class with resources they have found and want to share, or copies of work they have completed and wish to distribute to their base group members.

4. Get to know each other better and provide positive feedback by discussing such questions as: "What do you like about yourself?" and "What is the best thing that has happened to you this week?"

Class base groups support individual group members. If a group member arrives late, or must leave early one day, the group can provide information about what the student missed. Additionally, group members can assist one another with assignments such as writing required papers. In base groups, assignments can be discussed; papers can be planned, reviewed, and edited; and any questions regarding assignments and class sessions can be first addressed. If a group is unable to resolve an issue, it can then be brought to the teachers' attention.

Some attention should be paid to building a base group identity and group cohesion. The first week the base groups meet, for example, each can pick a name, design a flag, or choose a motto. If a teacher with the proper expertise is available, the groups will benefit from participating in a "challenge course" involving ropes and obstacles. Having groups undertake this type of physical challenge together builds cohesion quickly.

All members are expected to contribute actively to class discussions, work to maintain effective working relationships with other participants, complete all assignments, assist classmates in completing their assignments, express their ideas, change their minds only when persuaded by logic or new information, and indicate agreement with base group's work by signing a weekly contract.

## School Base Groups

At the beginning of the academic year, students should be assigned to school base groups (or the base groups from the previous year should be reconvened). Class schedules should be arranged so that members of base groups are assigned to as many of the same classes as possible. School base groups should stay together for at least a year; ideally, until all members are graduated. During the year, school base groups meet twice a day to twice a week.

When base groups meet twice each day, they meet first thing in the morning and last thing in the afternoon. At the beginning of each day students meet to welcome each other to school, check to see if everyone has completed and understands their homework, and just get to know and connect with each other better.

At the end of the day members meet in their base groups to see that everyone is taking their homework home, understands the assignments to be completed, and has the help and assistance they need to do their work. In addition, base groups might wish to discuss what members have learned during the day and check to see what plans members have for the evening. During the evening students can confer on the telephone or even study together.