

## Chapter 22

# Succeeding Together: Cooperative Learning in an At-Risk School

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### ABSTRACT

*Distress at school is one of the most pressing issues currently facing our school systems. There is, however, very little debate, discussion, research, or information on this matter, notwithstanding the fact that this distress can have a serious impact on the lives of the students affected, leading them to limit or to end their studies. This chapter aims to open up a debate on the social role that schools should play in order to combat the distress of students who live in areas remote from cities, who suffer a range of problems that can be both synchronous (student-student) or complementary (teacher-student). Here the difficulty manifested has been approached through cooperative learning, a methodology designed to activate a system of helping relationships, which result in the full involvement of each student in a number of key areas: collaborative structuring of the activity, assignment of roles, and co-constructive assessment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Learning is used, through special working techniques, to convey the acquisition of knowledge, skills or attitudes to overcome interference. Can *cooperative learning* support students, allowing them to deal with social distress and their difficulty in relating to others?

There can be no doubt that Italian schools are going through a period of serious difficulty,

a fact that has been stressed by authoritative voices both within and outside the education system. Our schools often attract the interest of the media, generally aimed at exposing the inefficiency of the system. They comment on the low scores obtained by Italian students in global assessments of knowledge and skills, or report incidents of seriously bad behavior from students or unprofessional conduct from teachers, revealing

difficulties in teaching and in maintaining decent human relationships in a democratic environment.

Distress in youth is a key issue in 21st century society, and one which also has a negative impact in schools, where the student's problems are a factor of disturbance to the work of the teacher, to class activities and to peer relationships. We should also consider how far the organization and planning dictated by "traditional" teaching methodology prevent the teacher from dealing with these emergency situations.

A necessary condition for the wellbeing of youth is to find a solution to distress in young people: this has been recognized by the World Health Organization in their report since 1961 and by the Italian Ministry for Health (communications nos. 240/91 and 241/91). In their last report the WHO cited a number of risk factors for mental health, including poverty, poor living conditions, break-up of social structure and so on etc. The WHO report also reported an increase in various forms of mental illness (Helsinki, 12-15 January 2005). Research conducted in this field (Bonino, 2005; Parsi & Toro, 2005; Barletta & Laganà, 2000) has concluded that in adolescents one of the main risk factors is difficulty in communicating, both with peers and with the outside world.

The first form of prevention entails eliminating the factors that are presumed to cause or to foster the onset of the disturbance. This is by no means a simple process, primarily because there are a number of these factors, which are not easy to isolate from their context and which cannot always be modified. The primary social settings (family, school and work) are the places where this preventive action can best be carried out. What is needed is educational action that involves all the social settings (but first and foremost schools) in order to reach adolescents going through the most critical stage of socialization.

In this chapter we will describe an experiment in learning carried out in an Italian second level high school (14 to 18 year olds) which is considered to be educationally "at risk." The school is

attended by students who manifest clear signs of social distress and difficulties in forming relationships, resulting from the geographical location of the area they live in, but also from the cultural and economic situations of their families.

For this reason this school has made efforts to facilitate interaction between students, encouraging a process of social exchange and communication among peers, and making the students aware that they are not isolated from the group since other members of the group are experiencing the same distress.

## **SETTING**

The high school where we carried out our project is located in the mountains in the south of Italy, in the province of Cosenza (Calabria). Although the area is not far from the nearest city (30 kms approx.), the residents of these villages, situated along the slopes of a valley, Valle del Savuto, seldom travel to the town. The population of the valley is very scattered and there are absolutely no urban centers. A breakdown of the residents by age groups shows clearly a larger proportion of the elderly (65% or more) and a much smaller number of children ((0 to 14 years). A 2001 report from the Italian institute for statistics (ISTAT) shows that the percentage of the elderly in the population had increased in the age range from 91 to 98.

The geographical features of the area create a number of problems for students of this high school, whose difficulties include poor social relations, low participation in learning activities and other factors causing distress. Principally, the farming and grazing economy of the area means that families require their children to be heavily involved in farm work, both in the fields and in caring for livestock. As a result a high percentage of students drop out of school, or, if they attend, show little interest and, consequently, make little effort to engage with school life. A further result is that these students fall further and further behind

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