



A Game Changer for Special Education

Beth Howell

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As a leader of a Primary school, one of the foremost things on your mind is how to engage *all* students. In particular, dealing with the achievement gap between special and general education students is something that all schools struggle with. With Kagan Structures, the staff at Wilbur Elementary thinks that we have found a game changer for our special education students.

You might be thinking, “There is no magic bullet to fix this issue,” but we would like to give you some examples of why we feel that the use of Kagan Structures is making all the difference in the world to our struggling students. It is all about the PIES!

All students in a classroom using Kagan Cooperative Learning are empowered in their learning. Students in these classrooms interact socially, as well as academically, while working together cooperatively because they have been taught how to interact with each other. While engaging in Kagan Structures, students have *Positive Interdependence* with their classmates. One student doing well at a task helps the others in the group to do well. Each student has *Individual Accountability* for the assignment or task at hand. This means that no one is able to hide and all have to actively be a part of the learning taking place. Each student has *Equal Participation* in each activity so their ideas and voices are always heard. The class has *Simultaneous Interaction*, which increases the percentage of students talking or writing from 3.3% in a classroom with the teacher asking questions and single students answering, to 25–50% using Kagan Structures. Students feel that they are on the same side as their teammates and that every person is necessary to complete any task being accomplished.

Observers to a classroom using Kagan Cooperative Learning cannot identify which students are special education and which are not because the classroom and structures create a cohesive, positive classroom. Students are all working together and engaged in tasks using structures that help to minimise the gaps between the achievement levels of students.

Mandie Johnson and Dezde Stella are co-teachers in a Year 2 classroom at Wilbur Elementary that has a percentage of special education students along with a mix of general education students. They have implemented Kagan Cooperative Learning for the past two years and wanted to share some first-hand experience of how these structures have benefited their struggling learners.



A perfect example of a simple structure implemented in our classroom is Timed Pair Share versus how many people implement Think-Pair-Share. In Kagan's Timed Pair Share, all students are actively engaged and participating in the task at hand because each student has a role. In Timed Pair Share, each student has time to think and then thirty seconds to share. If a student finishes early, his or her partner knows that he or she must ask questions or coach him or her until that time is up. When using Think-Pair-Share without specifying how students are to share, students are able to take a back seat and not participate because one student may share for the entire time and there is no requirement for equal participation. This encourages the struggling students to participate less frequently, which contributes to the achievement gap. However, the purposeful design of a Kagan classroom allows students to be paired within a close range of their achievement level. Therefore the gap between achievement levels is minimised enabling students to more cohesively collaborate.

We have seen significant success and growth academically and socially using Kagan Cooperative Learning in our classroom. A personal example from our classroom this year was a young boy with autism who, at the beginning of the year, had difficulty participating in group activities due to his lower academic level at the time and his tendency to shy away from situations which would draw attention to him. After using the Kagan teambuilding and classbuilding activities, as well as structures on a daily basis, this student now feels comfortable with his peers and in his cooperative learning group to participate actively. He now offers answers even if he is afraid they may be wrong because he knows his peers will not judge him but instead will coach him to the right answer, making him feel successful. A visitor to our classroom was amazed that she was unable to tell which children had IEP's because every single student in the room was fully engaged in higher-level thinking tasks and all were coaching and praising each other. Kagan Structures make the difference!