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Best Kept Secret: Cooperative Preschool Programs

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With today's lean economic conditions and concern about families one would think that the rich history of proven effectiveness of preschool cooperatives would make them a 'hot topic. Instead they are probably one of today's best kept secrets.

The first cooperative nursery school in the United States was started in 1916 by a group of twelve faculty wives at the University of Chicago. These women were responding to a new concern for the early pre-school years as valuable foundations for social and educational success. The works of Friedrich Froebel and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi had forged the way for widespread acceptance of the importance of kindergarten. Sisters, Margaret and Rachel McMillan in England and Maria Montessori in Italy were calling attention to the importance of the preschool years. Beyond securing a preschool education program for their children, the women at the University of Chicago wanted parent education for themselves and child-free time to participate in volunteer Red Cross work.

Five other parent cooperatives were established in various states during the 1920's. In California, the development of cooperatives was rapid. In 1927, Katharine Whiteside Taylor founded the Children's Community in Berkeley, California. Dr. Taylor is now widely recognized as the inspiration of the parent participation nursery school movement. Her concerns for the education of young children and parent involvement also included concern for families. Taylor and others worried about the degeneration of extended family networks. Nuclear families and women in particular, were increasingly isolated from associations and ties with other families. Cooperative preschools provided an opportunity for women and children to form family-like relationships with one another in a setting of reciprocal learning.

The idea took hold. As the movement grew, support organizations were formed to facilitate communication among parent cooperatives. Councils were formed at the city, state and regional levels. In 1948 California established the first statewide parent cooperative council. The cooperative approach also spread outside the U.S., with extensive memberships in Canada and New Zealand as well as numbers in Great Britain, France and other European countries. In 1960, Dr. Taylor founded the American Council of Cooperative Preschools; the name was later changed to Parent Cooperative Preschools International. The success of cooperatives influenced social policy. In fact, Head Start is a legacy of the cooperative preschool movement.

Today cooperatives are changing and shifting with their membership. Taylor recognized the need for changes in the 1981 edition of her classic book: *Parents and Children Learn Together*. She discusses strategies like allowing participation substitutes and offering

extended day programs to accommodate employed and single parents. She discusses the importance of the participation of fathers. Consistent with her earlier books (and perhaps with more passion) she discusses the invaluable contribution cooperatives provide families in offering "a family of families" to members. The benefits of support, community and sharing have positive influences for children and adults alike.

Cooperatives continue to survive. Parent Cooperative Preschools International boasts a membership of 10,000 families. In California, some 320 cooperatives provide care and enrichment programs for over 16,000 children. Recent research has confirmed that parent cooperative programs provide high quality care at reasonable rates. With knowledge like this you would think that cooperatives would be viewed as the vanguard of child care.

Unfortunately, parent cooperatives receive very little attention in public policy decisions, in child development literature and current periodicals. Several literature and periodical searches completed by this author reveal that there is only a handful of (dated) books available at leading university libraries. In the University of California and State libraries some of these works are available only at one or two institutions. There is a dearth of periodicals that publish articles about cooperatives. In an age where articles promoting "parent involvement" are in abundance, discussion of parent cooperatives is rare.

Clearly, cooperators need to "get the word out" and eliminate this best kept secret. The academic community also needs to take notice. They need to consult their history books and take a good look around them to notice contemporary cooperatives and their 'not so invisible' success stories.