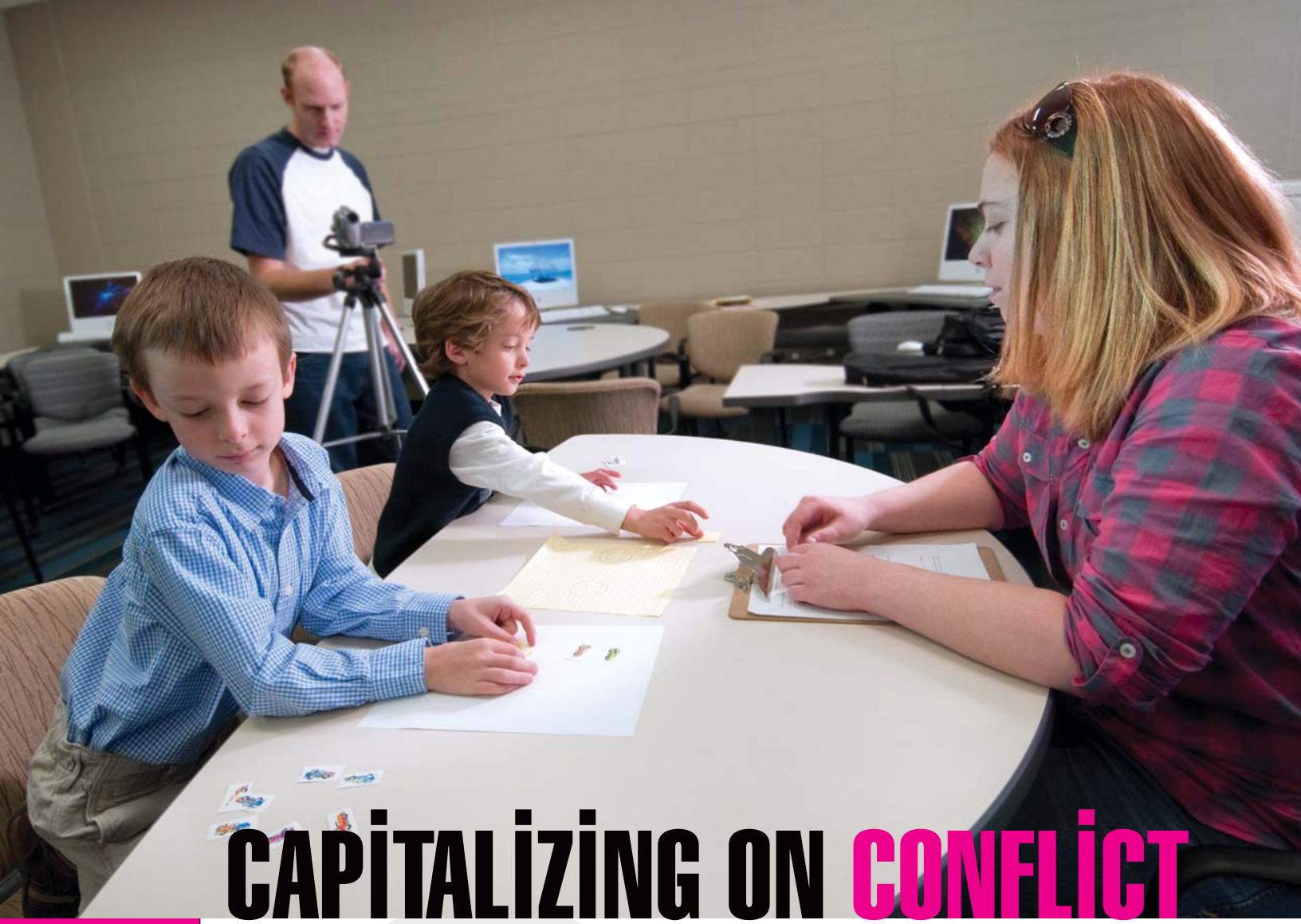


CAPITALIZING ON CONFLICT

ROSETH EXPLORES NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

SAY YOU'RE 4 YEARS OLD, ready to play a "trading game" beside another child you don't know.

An adult starts by giving both of you a piece of paper called a "token."

She says, "If you give me your paper token, then I will you give this," and places a fun-looking football sticker in front of you.

Cool, you think.

But wait. The other kid received more stickers than you did . . .

Will you accept the adult's offer and—just as importantly—how do you feel about it?

>> NICOLE GEARY

Assistant professor of educational psychology Cary Roseth set out to explore the foundations of fairness by observing how more than 150 children, ages 3 through 8, reacted in scenarios like this last school year.

Developmental theory suggests that fairness, or how much we care about other people's experiences in relation to our own, is a social concept that young children don't really grasp until 5 or 6 years old. Or is it?

Roseth's experiment showed that 3- and 4-year-olds also report "feeling sad" when they were offered fewer stickers than another child, even as they were still willing to trade their token for the sticker.

In contrast, the 7- to 8-year-olds refused to trade—much as most adults would if they were offered the same job as someone else for half the pay.

"Historically, young children were thought to be mostly selfish, either unaware or uninterested in other people's experiences," he said. "More recent work suggests the opposite—that young children are especially sensitive to social experience.

"For fairness, the developmental question is how children move from 'feeling sad' to caring enough about fairness to sacrifice personal gain? How does fairness become something so important that it guides how we think, feel and behave towards others?"

It's the kind of question that keeps Roseth focused on peer conflicts in early childhood, searching for knowledge that may help parents and educators capitalize on the sometimes unpleasant but potentially important social experiences.

He argues many of the "negative" behaviors we try to help kids avoid, such as not sharing, being aggressive or leaving peers out, are inevitable situations that may actually help kids develop important social (and academic) competencies.

"We can't assume they are all bad," Roseth said. "In fact, they may represent the very experiences children need to develop fairness, cooperation and constructive conflict resolution."

Therefore, his research raises some startling and even counterintuitive implications for how schools should—or shouldn't—intervene when young children don't get along.

The Call to Question Nature, Nurture

Roseth, who joined the MSU College of Education faculty in 2007, began his career in educational psychology by way of a private boarding school in Meriden, N.H.

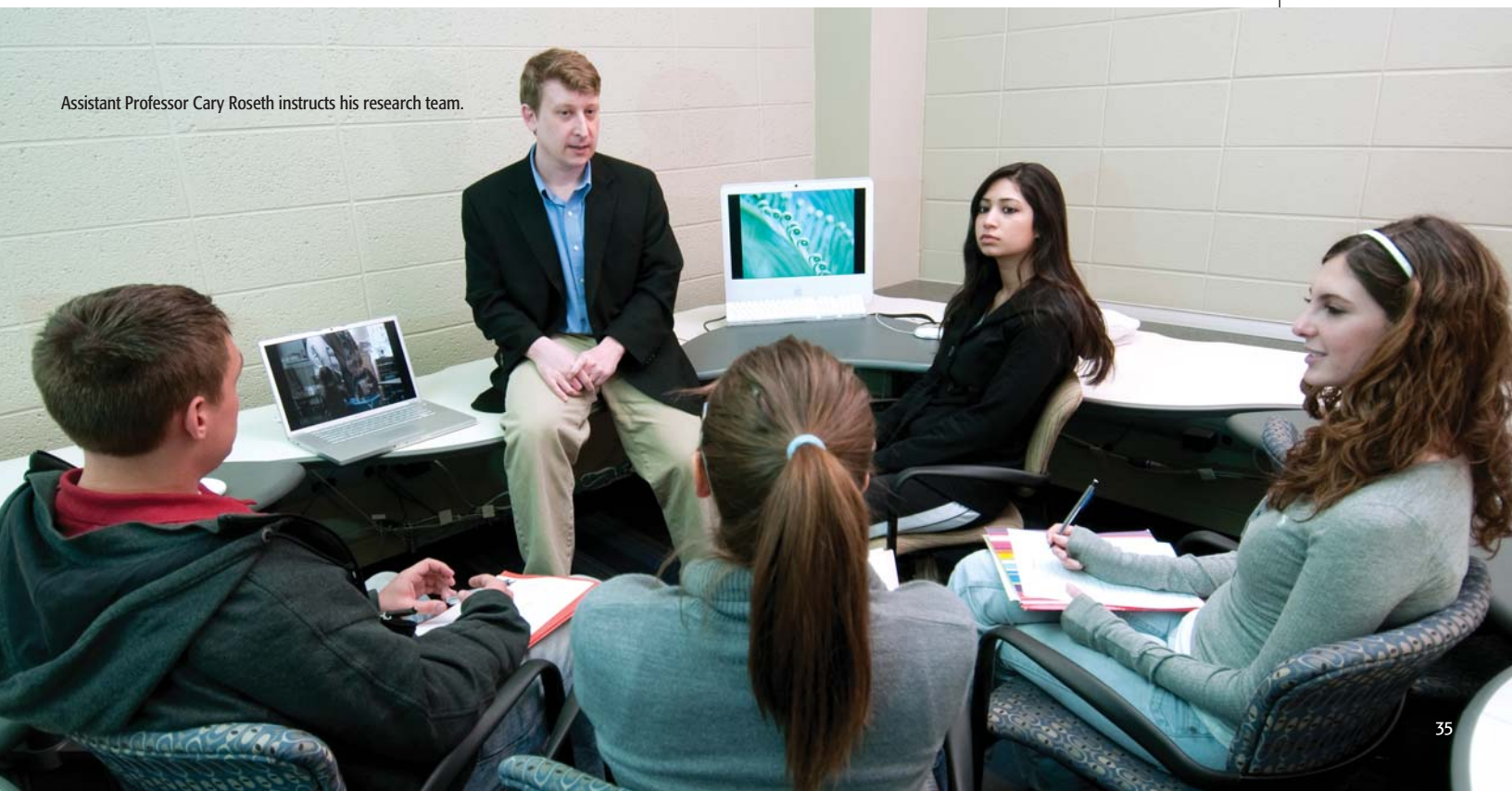
He planned to spend just a year there after college while preparing to attend medical school. However, teaching Spanish, coaching three sports and the chance to influence positive change in teens got a hold of him, and he stayed for 9 years.

It was one moment with one student that eventually rekindled Roseth's passion for science and, with it, a profound interest in psychology.

> "The purpose of schools, by definition, is to help children reach their full potential. It can't be a place where we get in the way of their natural tendencies."

He was assistant headmaster, moderating a panel discussion about the school's student leadership program when he asked "Carl," one of the school's best students, to explain what makes him a model leader. Dismayed, Roseth heard comments about being on time, following the dress code and so forth.

"He went through this list of very superficial requirements," Roseth said. "I thought, what are we doing as a school when one of our best students equates



Assistant Professor Cary Roseth instructs his research team.

WHAT'S NEXT: CYBERBALL AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Cary Roseth's latest study on youth peer relations began with undergraduate research participants this fall. He needs to test the experiment on college students before exposing younger students to the sensitive but all-too-common social dynamic in focus: rejection.

Cyberball, a computer game designed for psychological research, engages players in a virtual game of catch when, suddenly, the other players stop "throwing" the ball to the research participant. This allows researchers to document how young people might respond to feeling left out in the real world.

Undergraduate research assistants played an important role in the first phase of data collection, to which Roseth hopes to add elementary and early-childhood age groups starting in January. The research could generate powerful knowledge about the effects of social ostracism, and therefore constructive ways to address the issue—another form of conflict—in early childhood.

'following the rules' with model citizenship? Where was kindness, compassion, caring . . . ?"

So Roseth pursued a master's degree in educational psychology at University of Minnesota. He focused on issues of social development and peer relations in schools and received his Ph.D. from the same institution just three years later.

Research To Inform, Challenge Schools

Since then, Roseth has been leading a massive meta-analysis covering 100 years worth of studies on the effects of cooperative, competitive and individualistic goal structures.

Findings released in 2008 showed that 12- to 15-year-old students are more likely to have higher grades when they study in cooperative learning environments, or classrooms that promote positive peer friendships by encouraging students to work together toward common goals. Competitive environments, by contrast, can disrupt children's ability to form positive peer relationships, which in turn may hurt their academic potential.

The research, conducted with colleagues at Minnesota, has since expanded to analyze data for preschool-age through adult populations, including students with disabilities.

Meanwhile, Roseth has been no stranger to the classrooms where peer relations first develop. This past spring, he and his team of graduate and undergraduate researchers finished collecting video footage capturing more than 300 conflicts between children during free play in local Head Start programs.

With data analysis now underway, Roseth plans to compare the findings against a similar study he conducted with a more affluent, homogenous population of 3- through 5-year-olds in Minnesota. And those results raised interesting questions for teachers.

If a teacher intervened, children were less likely to remain playing together immediately after a conflict (ranging from a disagreement over toys to a hitting match). If the children separated after a conflict, they were equally likely to reconcile with one another *regardless* of whether an adult attempted to remedy the problem.

"Not only are the children coming back together, they are doing so more frequently than if the conflict never occurred," said Roseth, who has two sons in elementary school. "Rather than avoiding conflict, it may be the very mechanism by which preschoolers grow closer together."

Along with video observation, the study also includes teacher questionnaires and interviews with kids to test theories about how their behaviors shift over time. Roseth said the most aggressive children in class at the beginning of the year often become the most well-liked by year's end.

He urges educators to be open-minded—and perhaps more hands-off—in their approach to behavior problems.

"The purpose of schools, by definition, is to help children reach their full potential," he said. "It can't be a place where we get in the way of their natural tendencies."

MORE INFO

Visit Cary Roseth's Web site for more on his research, including video from the study on fairness development in children: **www.msu.edu/~croseth**.

NEW FACULTY

Alicia C. Alonzo

Assistant professor, Teacher Education; Ph.D., California Institute of Technology

All of Alonzo's academic degrees are in physics. She was studying a way of fabricating semiconductor lasers when, along the way, K–12 education began to reshape her career.

Now she finds satisfaction sorting out the complexities of science teaching and learning. And formative assessment, she argues, is one of the most central challenges in that arena. Her research focuses on the tools and knowledge teachers need to have productive interactions with their students.

"Teachers need to have a very deep understanding of not just the content, but how students interface with the content," she said. "We often don't prepare teachers to learn from their own practice."

Coming to MSU from a position at University of Iowa, Alonzo has received a fellowship from the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation to explore how video can help beginning physics teachers deepen their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). She has also studied science learning progressions and associated assessment tools.

Florian A. Kagerer

Assistant professor, Kinesiology; Ph.D., Ludwig-Maximilians University (Munich, Germany)

Kagerer studies adaptive motor control, and he is particularly interested in the mechanisms affecting children with developmental motor dysfunctions—or, for example, why some kids are often clumsier than others.

His recent research found that, when pointing to visual targets, children with