

## RESEARCH ON GROUP WORK AND COLLABORATIVE WORK AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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### ABSTRACT

Group work is one of the teaching strategies used by teachers who attempt to make their teaching more effective. Collaborative work is an important aspect of group work. Even though group work is used by some teachers in their classrooms, there is a considerable variation in the extent and nature of such work. Therefore, it is necessary to examine group and collaborative work, to indicate their importance and the variable use of these techniques.

In this study, firstly, collaborative work has been defined and then its importance, purposes, benefits for both students and teachers, and some problems that teachers confront in their classrooms have been discussed. Secondly, the variation between the teachers who are using group work, collaborative work, individual or whole class work have been explored and different kinds of group work have been described. Then, some research evidences on group work have been referenced and the consistency of results has been discussed. Finally, some recommendations for teachers in using group work and collaborative work have been made.

*Key Words:* Group Work, Collaborative Work, Primary School Teachers

## GRUP ÇALIŞMASI VE İŞBİRLİKLİ ÇALIŞMA ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA VE İLKÖĞRETİM ÖĞRETMENLERİ İÇİN BAZI ÖNERİLER

### ÖZET

Grup çalışması, öğretimlerini daha etkili hale getirmeye çalışan öğretmenlerin başvurduğu öğretim stratejilerinden biridir. İşbirlikli çalışma da grup çalışmasının önemli bir elemanıdır. Her ne kadar grup çalışması öğretmenler tarafından kullanılıyor olsa da bu yaklaşımın kullanımında ve doğasında pek çok farklılıklar mevcuttur. Bu nedenle, grup ve işbirlikli yaklaşımları incelemek, önemlerini ve bu tekniklerin kullanımındaki farklılıkları belirtmek gereklidir.

Bu derleme çalışmasında ilk olarak, grup ve işbirlikli yaklaşım tanımlanmış; önemi, amaçları, öğrenciler ve öğretmenler için faydaları, öğretmenlerin bu teknikleri kullanırken karşılaşılabilecekleri problemler tartışılmıştır. İkinci olarak, grup çalışmasını, işbirlikli yaklaşımı, bireysel ve tüm sınıf çalışmasını kullanan öğretmenler arasındaki çeşitlilik tespit edilerek grup çalışmasının çeşitleri belirtilmiştir. Daha sonra, grup çalışması üzerine yapılan çalışmalardan bahsedilerek bu çalışmaların arasındaki tutarlılık tartışılmıştır. Son olarak, grup ve işbirlikli yaklaşımlarının kullanımı konusunda öğretmenlere bazı önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Grup Çalışması, İşbirlikli Yaklaşım, İlköğretim Öğretmenleri

## 1. Introduction

Group work is one of the teaching strategies available to teachers attempting to make their teaching more effective. Some teachers use group work in their classrooms but there is considerable variation in the extent and nature of such work. Collaborative work is an important aspect of group work.

The main purpose of this study is to research collaborative work and to indicate its importance. This study consists of four parts. In the first part, definitions of collaborative work will be presented. After that its importance, purposes, benefits for both students and teachers and some problems that teachers confront in their classrooms will be discussed. In the second part of study, evidence relating of amount of group and collaborative work will be presented. In addition, the variation between the teachers who are using group work, collaborative work, individual or whole class work will be explored. Furthermore, different kinds of group work will be described. The third part is about some research studies in primary schools. Different kinds of group work will be analysed and then some research evidences will be referenced. Thirdly, the consistency of results from this research will be discussed. At the end of this section, some general findings will be determined. In the last part of this study, it can be found the recommendations that could encourage the teachers to use group work and collaborative work.

## 2. Definitions

Various definitions of group work and collaborative work have been suggested by many researchers. According to Slavin, (1986, as cited in Dunkin ed. 1987: 238) "Group work is a division of the class into

learning groups of four to six members who are of all levels of ability. These groups also have mix of boys and girls and students of different racial, ethnic backgrounds in about some proportion, they represent in the class as a whole."

Group work has been defined by Cullingford (1995: 83) as "...One means of allowing orally to develop and creating conditions in which some central ideas are tackled..."

In Beard's (1978, as cited in Dunkin, ed., 1987: 288) opinion, "Group work is a discussion of academic work that affords students the opportunity to organise their thinking by comparing ideas and interpretation with each other and to give expression and hence form to their understanding of a subject."

We can see a distinction in this definition between group work as an organisational strategy and group work as having distinctive cognitive aims. Collaborative work defined as a more developed form of "group work", where work is done together and the outcome is a combined product, perhaps in the form of a model or play (Pollard & Tann, 1987: 104).

It has been suggested by Bennett & Dunne (1989, as cited in Galton & Williamson, 1992: 10) that "In collaborative work all the pupils are expected to work together to produce a single outcome and the group has to debate a social or moral issue and produce agreed solutions or recommendations."

To put it briefly, collaborative group work is a teaching method, in which students who are between four and six, sometimes eight students sit in a group around the table and they share resources

and their ideas and also work and discuss together for common goal. Groups can be homogeneous or heterogeneous on the basis of students' physical characteristics, gender, race, ethnic origin, individual differences and their interests. On the other hand, teachers plan, organise and supervise them.

### 3. What issues do the teachers have to consider?

There is considerable evidence abused on previous use of group and collaborative work. In many schools many teachers use this method but before using this method, teachers have to consider some issues. It has been indicated by Galton & Williamson (1992) that "...according to some teachers, working together in a groups is an adult activity and it is not to be expected that young children of primary age will find it easy. After all, children at this age are very self-centred..." This may be the reason for the prevalence of individualised work in primary classrooms.

Firstly, teachers have to choose *the best task* for group work because some tasks are more appropriate for individual work and some of them for group works.

*Classroom dimensions* are the second issue for grouping. Some schools may have small classrooms which could be a problem for group work.

*Group sizes* are another issue for grouping. How many children should be in a group working together?

In group work a very crucial issue is that teachers have *to choose the best working groups*. The teachers' wrong choices and their mis-matching lead to unsuccessful group works and inappropriate talking. For

these reasons, many teachers abandon the group work.

To decide the classroom seating, some teachers allow the children to choose their group and some teachers choose the groups. Wragg (1993, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 30) reported that "...a variety of practise in smaller sample of 17 teachers; three assigned seating positions, six allowed open choice, at least initially and the remainder permitted negotiation..." Nevertheless it is not very easy to decide the best group seating.

It is known that in classrooms there are students who are from different age, gender, race, social background and ethnic group who have different achievements, abilities and friendships.

Consequently, teachers have to decide whether to organise homogeneous groups or heterogeneous groups.

Moreover, students at young ages do not necessarily know how to work together or, for example, how to conduct discussions. According to Croll and Hastings (1996: 52), when group tasks involve controversial issues, "...group discussion can soon lead to angry confrontation".

It could be thought that, group work is easy because teachers do not have to introduce an idea and provide resources for each pupil separately. Of course, it is true but teachers have to do careful organisation and planning besides these teachers have to be careful when they are punishing or praising because they have to be equal.

In primary schools sometimes children can be aggressive and they do not respect each other. At their ages they need to acquire a social personality and they need to be aware

of that they are one of the member of their groups. In Covie's opinion (1994, as cited in Croll & Hastings 1996: 48) "Children use avoidance strategies to evade participating in the group or adopt more aggressive roles." They need to learn listening, getting knowledge from each other and discussing without being aggressive.

#### **4. The Purpose of Group and Collaborative Work**

Group and collaborative work may be an effective teaching strategy with regard to the use of teacher time and other resources. It may also be a strategy to allow particular types of learning such as group discussions. In spite of those issues group work and collaborative work are a necessary part of teaching. The purpose of the group work and collaborative work are to share the classroom resources, each other's ideas and work together for common goal. As we know that sometimes resources may not be enough for all individual students and also that some tasks need to be discussed. In such cases, group work could be solution for teaching.

#### **5. The Benefits of Collaborative Group Work**

Group work and collaborative work are lead to supportive and secure learning environment. Students become active and patient. They can learn co-operative working. They respect each other, their ideas and weaknesses. In group work they can take a chance to use their skills, knowledge, experiences. Particularly they can learn and teach each other. So they can learn to work interdependently and not be dependent on their teacher. They can realise that getting knowledge is possible without teacher. In group work the importance of teacher is the planner, supervisor and organiser. Students can understand each

other. They become social not individualist. Their self-esteem improves and pupil motivation increases.

According to Cullingford (1995: 18), "Group work also can be used to avoid having to provide multiple copies of the same material." Because in every different groups' different ideas are due to different original outcomes.

Children can be good teachers because they can understand each other. Because of using group work, children accept learning from each other.

In Biott's (1987, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 46) opinion because of the group work "...the number of the slow learning pupils can reduced...". Also teacher can provide discipline by giving some instructions to only one group at the same time and the other groups obey those rules.

A further issue, teachers do not need to teach to every individual and that group members influence each other. According to Bridges (1979, as cited in Dunkin, 1987: 232), "Discussion has the advantage of encouraging young children and illiterate people to express their ideas and to learn new ones, despite the fact that they can not read and write. Discussion has been adopted to achieve those broad instructional objectives: Subject-matter mastery, attitude change, moral development, problem solving and acquisition of communication skills. Additionally, a good discussion motivates students to encourage in further inquiry and provides the teacher with feedback on student progress."

Collaborative work leads to children to like each other because they work for common goal and they like each other who

helps them to achieve their goals (Slavin, 1986, as cited in Dunkin, 1987: 237).

Teachers can demonstrate discussion techniques to encourage collaborative learning. In the same way they can stimulate children's thinking by exploring ideas. They can ask questions and children try to solve problems together (Pollard & Tann, 1987: 104-105).

Besides this, children share common problems and evaluate work at the end of the discussion. Galton argues that when a "...pupil does use a classmate as a learning resource this is generally accomplished by listening to the teacher talking to the other child trying to pick up clues from their conversation..." (Galton, 1989, as cited in Galton & Williamson, 1992: 4). So they improve their mind and knowledge.

Furthermore, teachers can provide a suitable learning atmosphere to low learning students. (DES, 1978)

As mentioned before, the teachers do not need to teach every student separately as a result of these teachers can use their teaching time economically. They can use this time efficiently. This is intended to improve quality of learning.

Group teaching method improves the shy and silence students. They benefit to join conversations, discussions. They become social persons.

It goes without saying group and collaborative work have many advantages for students, teachers but there are some difficulties that teachers must consider them.

## **6. Problems of Collaborative Group Work**

Firstly, teachers have to learn how can they arrange groups and how can manage with them, how can they teach effectively. In order to use group work in their classroom teachers need to have some training in counselling skills. Generally all teachers find it difficult to involve students in discussion. As was mentioned before according to Croll & Hastings, 1996: 52) "Group discussions can soon lead to angry confrontation." Biott (1987, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 45) believes that children are generally intolerant of each other's views. Moreover, he emphasises that group leaders may be bossy and impatient. In particular teachers have to provide real group work conditions. Also, there is an another problem. Sometimes in a group every student does not take the same equal responsibilities. Some pupils do their work collaboratively but on the other hand some pupils do not join the collaboration. Some pupils do not help each other. This may be a particular problem for the contribution of low achieving pupils.

Children generally have not got responsibility for their own learning because of this they try to find some outcomes that their teachers like or their teachers think. Children need to take responsibility for their own learning.

## **7. The Variation of Teachers Who Use Group Work**

The researches show that most teachers do not use group and collaborative work to any great extent. Galton (1991) has pointed out "...that only 14.5 per cent of the time when children were seated together and were working together..." Apart from this Galton (1981, as cited in Galton & Williamson, 1991: 48) emphasises "...that 69 per cent of teachers never used any kind of group work in lessons. Similarly 90 per

cent of teachers never used group work for single subject teaching, for example; mathematics or language lessons...”.

Bronfenbrenner (1971, as cited in Cullingford, 1995: 77) believes that “...In the democratic countries there was observed to be far more emphasis on individuality and competition...” Because of individualism children work by themselves and they become self-centred.

### **8. The Kinds of Group Work**

In primary schools there are different kinds of grouping and group work:

1. The first one is seating groups in which each child has own task and they prepare different assignments. This is not group work as children are sitting together but working independently.
2. In working groups children sit together in their group and they have same task. They work by themselves and individual outcomes are expected from them. Although children are not working together those may be teaching advantages in that teacher can work with that group.
3. In co-operative work children sit together in their group and they have different but related task and they prepare joint outcome. For example; making a map, planning journey, planning picnic...
4. In collaborative work children sit together in their group. They have same task and they work together. They talk, discuss the task. They share same resources. For example; Problem solving, discussion of social or moral issue. In this case the outcome is necessarily a joint one.

### **9. Some Research Evidence on Group Work**

Slavin mentions that if the children work together for common goal they will be successful and they will become interdependent each other. He divides the class four to six members groups from all levels of ability and his groups contain a mix of racial, ethnic backgrounds and that groups represent whole class.

Researches show that:

- Dreeben (1968, as cited in Dunkin, 1987: 229) has suggested that the teacher can arrange a group structure to prevent inappropriate talk.
- “...Sit in groups and work together increase pupil-esteem and pupil motivation...” (Croll & Hastings, 1996: 50).
- A circular seating pattern provides for all members to see each others.
- Mc Namara Waugh (1993, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 30) recommended that “...the “horse shoe” arrangement is the best arrangement for all working types...”.
- The standard size for group work is four or five. When group is formed from three members, one pupil can be isolated and not join the discussion. When the group size is more than five for teachers to find different tasks for each child is very difficult.
- Producing homogeneity among groups is very difficult.
- Homogeneous grouping provides advantage for high ability students. In contrast to homogeneous grouping heterogeneous grouping provides advantage for low ability students.
- Homogeneous group members are more cohesive than heterogeneous group members.
- Also there is an another finding that is about to choose homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. Bennett (1985)

suggested that the heterogeneous groups lead to high interaction. When there are two low and one high ability student there is a highest interaction.

- Hofmann (1959, as cited in Dunkin, 1987: 235) indicated that “...heterogeneous groups showed superior performance on a problem.
- Gerard & Miller (1976) found that when the groups are formed from different ethnic and racial students, they make good friendship with each other. Also they continue their friendship after group working.
- Another research is about different approaches to group work among girls and boys. Webb (1983) found that boys like to make more suggestions but girls avoid the discussions. Girls generally prefer consensus. Galton & Williamson (1992) in the contrast to Webb’s study they observed that low ability boys try to take an active part in discussion but slow learning girls choose remain silent. They do not try to join discussion and generally high ability girls tend to be group leader.
- Bennett & Cass (1989) emphasise that the girls are speaking more frequently in their groups.
- Groups must be included children who are from multi ethnic, mixed ability and also different sex. In Wheldall & Olds (1987, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 41) opinion “...when children sit together same sex researches indicate that there are more chatting but children dislike sitting next to opposite sex so that they engage their tasks...”
- Because of the variety of members children can produce different outcomes.
- ORACLE study show that (Galton, et al., 1980, as cited in Galton & Williamson, 1991: 11) in English and mathematics lessons the students;

80 % of their times work alone on their individual assignments.

12 % of their times work as a class or a register group.

9 % of their times work co-operative.

The lowest level of distraction was found that when the pupils were working in a group.

Barnes, et al., (1969, & Barnes & Todd, 1977, as cited in Galton & Williamson, 1991) studied in the lower secondary school. They observed the small groups whose teachers did not help and supervise them. At the end students were very successful. Their discussion was very good quality. According to this study Barnes & Todd, (1977: 35) believe that student can learn and increase their knowledge without teacher. Similarly Tough (1977: 35) studied in nursery and infant children. She emphasises that even those children make good discussions.

- A problem solving needs a smaller group five or six members.
- Open-ended tasks are not usually the best for group work. Instead of open-ended task, problem-solving tasks are more useful because their assessments are easier than open-ended tasks and pupils can move towards a definite outcome.
- Reward is very useful for group works because each child is interdependent each others score for their group score because of increase their group score children help, teach each other. According to Cohen (1994, as cited in Croll & Hastings, 1996: 48) “...the competitive group work is very useful to develop their thinking ability...”

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Group work are organisational issues and curriculum / learning issues.
- Evidence shows that children have to be taught to work together.
- Group work should be used for problem solving, not for open-ended tasks.
- Group sizes should be four or five.
- Group members should have different sex, race, ethnic, socio-economical background, and different ability children.
- Teachers should stimulate the pupil's thinking and communication skills.
- Teachers should motivate children to work together to share resources and ideas.
- Teachers should teach some discussion methods.
- Teachers should carefully plan, organise and monitor the groups.
- Teachers should teach children to work for common goal, not for individual,
- Teachers should encourage children to take responsibility.

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