

Improving the effects of group working in classrooms with young school-aged children: Facilitating attainment, interaction and classroom activity

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Abstract

Within primary school classrooms children are often seated in groups but research shows that pupils do not collaborate or learn effectively within these groups. This study is focused on children 5–7 years old. Using a quasi-experimental design, children in experimental classes undertook relational activities to improve the effectiveness of group working during a school year. Nine hundred and eighty children (from 17 experimental and 21 control classes) were assessed and compared for attainment (reading and mathematics), motivation for group working and behavioural/communicative actions. Over a school year, children in experimental classes improved more than children in control classes with regard to academic attainment, motivation to work with others, group and on-task focus and showed high levels of communicative interaction with partners. It is concluded that young children are capable of engaging in effective group work that promotes academic achievement.

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1. Introduction

Since the education of children became a mass phenomenon in the 19th century, the resulting organisation into schools and classrooms implied that pupils receive most of their teaching and learning in some form of grouping. Pedagogic studies that inform the teaching and learning process (e.g., Mortimore, 1999) do not appear to acknowledge the importance of pupil groups; pedagogy, as discussed within the literature, mainly focuses on the teacher–pupil relationship (acknowledging the individual learner), and largely neglects to identify that the majority of children's classroom time is spent in the presence of peers (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003). On the other hand, studies that focus on the frequency and use of naturally occurring pupil groupings in classrooms consistently note that these

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groupings do not feature as contexts for collaboration that promotes learning — these pupil groups often inhibit classroom learning (Dreeben, 1984; Galton, 1990; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Pell, 1999).

The statements above should not be taken as evidence that studies of effective classroom groups do not exist. Co-operative and collaborative (structured into classroom activity) studies have drawn upon various forms of pupil grouping to promote cognitive development, motivation to work with others and pro-school attitudes (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Littleton, Miell, & Faulkner, 2004; Slavin, 1995). Reviews of co-operative and collaborative studies show moderate advantages in using a structured ‘social’ pedagogic context (such as co-operative groups) to enhance children’s attainment and pro-school attitudes (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Slavin, 1990). These reviews, though, rarely include studies of children aged 5–7 years — at the start of their primary (elementary) schooling (Battistich & Watson, 2003; Littleton et al., 2005). And, the focus of those studies that do draw upon co-operative and collaborative learning with young children tends to be single curriculum oriented — e.g., in literacy strategies (Mathes & Babyak, 2001) and in focused elaboration of skills for mathematics (Fuchs et al., 1997).

Moreover, many of the studies concerning effective group work have shortcomings when considered for general classroom use. As identified in Kutnick, Sebba, Blatchford, and Galton (2005), these shortcomings include the following: a tendency for group work to be undertaken over a short time period; a focus on input–output as opposed to process models; disaggregating of aspects of group work innovation (such as task or group structure) from the general classroom/grouping context; an assumption that relationships of support among children will be a product of effective group working; and a further assumption that the experimentally imposed conditions of a co-operative/collaborative study can be generalised to normal classroom activity. Even innovative studies that focus on internal communication and talk among group members (Howe & Tolmie, 2003; Littleton et al., 2005; Mercer, 2000; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003) and quality interactions between classroom teacher and a particular group of pupils (Adey, Robertson, & Venville, 2002) rarely account for group and collaborative work that involves the whole class (undertaking this work simultaneously) over a school year.

2. Pupil grouping in primary schools

Pupils are placed in some form of grouping within classrooms throughout their schooling (Kutnick, Blatchford, & Baines, 2002, 2005). This simple statement masks much more complex classroom-based actions and interactions concerning pupil groupings — sometimes promoting children’s learning and often inhibiting that learning. Grouping of pupils for learning does not indicate that any particular size, structure, or function of group will be found (or used to positive effect) in the classroom. Naturalistic ‘maps’ of classrooms indicate that grouping size may range from individual pupils, to pairs, to small groups (4–6 pupils), large groups (10–15 pupils) and whole class (Kutnick et al., 2002). Pupil groups may be structured to allow for single- or mixed-sex interactions (Tann, 1981), single- or mixed-ability interactions (Ireson & Hallam, 2001) or friendship interactions (Hartup, 1998). Groupings may be structured to promote cognitive development (Light & Littleton, 1994), social and relational development (Hall, 1994; Howes & Tonyan, 1999) or particular forms of co-operation (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Sharan & Sharan, 1992; Slavin, 1995). Other pupil groupings found in classrooms may simply be a functional expression of the ratio of classroom furniture (tables and chairs) to number of children in a class (Dreeben, 1984; Hastings & Chantry, 2002).

Grouping of pupils in classrooms is associated with co-operation and collaboration which is at the heart of socio-cognitive development (see Salonen, Vauras, & Efkides, 2005). Groupings are used in a range of learning tasks, but they have not been found to (consistently) support cognitive development. Reviews of both naturalistic and experimental studies of pupil grouping in primary schools reveal that children’s classroom-based learning offers limited insight on how to work with younger, school-aged children. The majority of these studies have taken place in the higher age range of primary and secondary schools, probably because it is believed that young children (in the 5–7 years age range) are not able to display the required social and communicative skills to enhance the likelihood of group-based learning (Battistich & Watson, 2003; Davis, 1991). Naturalistic studies, such as Galton, Simon, and Croll (1980) and Galton et al. (1999) have noted that while pupils are often seated in small groups, they are rarely assigned co-operative or collaborative tasks. Teachers often do not develop or support group work, and children show dependence on their teachers and are insecure or lacking trust when working in the presence of peers. Many of the learning tasks that are assigned to pupils are not cognitively challenging and not structured for group working (Bennett, 1994; Bossert, Barnett, & Filby, 1984; Kutnick et al., 2002). Furthermore, naturalistic studies that focus on the quality of children’s

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