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# Briefing and debriefing: Investigating the role of the teacher within group work science lessons



Sarah MacQuarrie\*

Department of Psychology, University of Strathclyde, UK<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Although effective group work approaches have been established within research, such methodologies may be difficult for teachers to utilise, as group work remains under-researched in UK secondary schools. This paper examines whether secondary teachers in Scotland could consolidate their understanding of principles supporting group work and accommodate changes within lessons. Conventional teaching of a specific topic was replaced with an intervention that investigated the role of the teacher at the introduction (briefing) and conclusion (debriefing) stages of lessons. Encouraging results were obtained in this small-scale study. Teachers can enhance group work when the complex mix of arrangements and planning are made realistic. Methodology developed to support teachers before, during, and following group work, has been substantiated and warrants further investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of the teacher in the establishment and continuation of a supportive classroom environment has been recognised (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2009a; Baines, Rubie-Davies, & Blatchford, 2009b; Galton & Williamson, 1992; O'Connor & Michaels, 1993; Oliveira & Sadler, 2008). However, only a subset of studies investigating group work has considered the role of the teacher and fewer have looked at classroom practice. As studies focusing on secondary education are also scarce, whether forms of group work supported by research can be realised in actual classrooms is uncertain (Baines, Blatchford, et al., 2009; Baines, Rubie-Davies, et al., 2009; Gillies, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2007; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Previous research has reported that teachers can contribute to and hinder interaction (Webb, 2009), suggesting that accessible guidance would be welcomed. Research has indicated that few overt changes are visible in the ways teachers approached different forms of teaching and learning, including when class sizes were reduced (Galton & Pell, 2012), small groups were used during lessons (MacQuarrie, Howe, & Boyle, 2012) and when wider professional development programmes targeted the approaches of those working in the early years sector (Stephen, Ellis, & Martlew, 2010). Teachers do not appear to capitalise on changes that they put in place, approaching different teaching and learning arrangements as one and the same.

Research investigating group work within secondary education has begun to acknowledge and incorporate the role of the teacher (Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009; Gillies, 2004). Galton et al. (2009) introduced a specific group work programme and evaluated secondary teacher's group work strategies and commented that encouraging findings were evident when time was available at the close of group work lessons to consolidate learning and round up the lesson. Observation of naturally

\* Tel.: +44 07920703894.

E-mail addresses: [sarah.macquarrie@perth.uhi.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.macquarrie@perth.uhi.ac.uk), [sarahmacquarrie2002@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sarahmacquarrie2002@yahoo.co.uk).<sup>1</sup> Now based at Centre for Rural Childhood, Perth College, University of the Highlands and Islands, PH1 2NX.

occurring practice within Scottish secondary classes evidenced similar difficulties encountered by teachers during group work lessons resulting in little or no time remaining for lessons to be concluded (MacQuarrie et al., 2012). The Scottish study unearthed few attempts of teachers establishing and maintaining a dialogue with pupils when group work was used and teachers did not consistently report that they explained the norms for interaction before commencing group work. A limited or constrained introduction prior to group work is potentially worrying given that research has explored how teachers effectiveness or otherwise can draw out pupils' thinking and ready them for interaction and thereby influence group work (Webb et al., 2009, 2008). These studies researched pupils and teachers within classrooms, and evaluated the use of group work through comparison with conventional teaching (broadly equivalent to whole-class and individual learning approaches). Thus, the current paper used a similar approach, where a specific topic area was replaced with an intervention that investigated the role of the teacher at the introduction (briefing) and conclusion (debriefing) stages of lessons, understood through comparison with conventional teaching of a separate class.

Given that teachers encounter difficulties in aligning their approach to lessons with the teaching and learning arrangements set in place for pupils; how can they support group work? Teacher's behaviour recorded during typical classroom interaction has been labelled the "IRF exchange" where teachers initiate material (I), pupils respond (R), and teachers provide feedback (F) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Tharp and Gallimore (1991) suggest such interaction often seeks out predictable and obvious answers, and in relation to group work may only serve to devalue pupils' contributions. Thus, comparing teachers' behaviour (those participating in the intervention with counterparts not participating) helps look at changes in behaviour and helps to provide a clearer picture of teachers' talk surrounding the use of group work in lessons. During such lessons, teachers must align their perspective with the representations held by pupils and this requires teachers to gauge to what extent pupils' comprehension can be stretched. This mirrors the interpretation made within research regarding "scaffolding", where external support is provided during social interaction with an expert (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Rather than dismiss scaffolding on the basis that scant evidence has been reported from studies of authentic classrooms, it should be highlighted as support for how teachers should prepare and address pupils within group work lessons (for example MacQuarrie et al., 2012; Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2011). Thus, a version of scaffolding may need to operate at the classroom level when teachers grasp opportunities to talk about group work and the topic under investigation. Although it may be difficult to conceive scaffolding operating in this manner indirect evidence supports this assertion. Tharp and Gallimore (1991, p. 110) propose that through the "weaving of new, schooled concepts with the concepts of everyday life" teachers can instigate a change in their talk, and develop connections in pupils' understanding. Studies by Mercer and colleagues (Fernandez, Wegerif, Mercer, & Rojas-Drummond, 2001; Mercer, 2002) lend support and show how teachers' behaviour can be successfully included within a broader intervention; progression in teachers' behaviour could lead to developments in the understanding shared by pupils and their teacher for the duration of a joint activity (labelled the intermental development zone) and the nature of talk used by teachers within lessons.

Accordingly, detailed explanation of briefing (prior to) and debriefing (following) behaviours used to support group work were developed, and explored in the documents given to teachers. Such behaviours were condensed into "process" and "contextualise" characteristics and used to develop observation categories to record teacher behaviour.<sup>2</sup> These characteristics help signal to teachers that their role is vital when group work is introduced and embedded within forms of teaching and learning taking place within classrooms. Process talk stemmed from inclusion of similar content to that deployed in previous research (Baines, Blatchford, & Chowne, 2007). It was designed to coordinate and align teachers' and pupils' understanding of group interaction. Teachers involved in the research were provided with specific details as to how they could explain and give feedback to pupils about interaction in groups, such reminders having been shown to be influential in pupils' continued focus and attention to learning whilst working as groups.

The second aspect, "contextualise", focused on clarifying communication between pupils and their teacher regarding the concepts and principles being studied within a lesson. Teachers were recommended to add meaning to pupils' understanding, by probing thinking, and making connections with real life examples and content examined in previous lessons. It is argued that such statements provide pupils with a specific message, that teachers value contributions sourced from groups and that content learned in groups has intrinsic value for pupils' understanding and knowledge. Observation classifications utilised in the current study are derived from such guidance and encapsulate previous findings that emphasise the role of pupil explanations during group work (Howe et al., 2007) and that teachers' prompts and questions can elicit extended contributions from pupils (Webb et al., 2009; Webb, Nemer, & Ing, 2006). Although open and closed questions have been explored in relation to pupils' classroom contributions the distinction separating them has been criticised (Galton & Williamson, 1992), therefore deep and shallow probes (labels assigned to observation categories in the current study) were more appropriate when recording questioning behaviour. This paper aimed to evaluate teachers' behaviour in relation to group work, comparing teachers who utilised an intervention with those who did not. Thus, developing observation categories derived from qualities of the intervention was appropriate to achieve this aim.

Group work is considered as a form of learning that enables a shared framework between a teacher and their class to be established, where working in groups is viewed as a valuable enterprise, incorporating task and non-task learning and where social interaction is key to fulfilling a group's aims. Studies agree that how teachers foster group work must be based upon

<sup>2</sup> More detail regarding categories is provided in Section 2.

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