

The implementation of group work in Hong Kong: A case study

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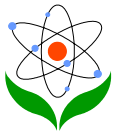
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Abstract

This article focused on the practical experience of a primary school teacher in applying group work in General Studies in Hong Kong. The followings are the main points for discussion: to offer some ideas for using cooperative learning effectively in primary school; to discuss the role of assessment in group work and provide readers with guidance for designing effective group assessments; to state the importance of teachers' professional development in this area; and, to suggest problems and limitations that may arise when cooperative learning is implemented. In this paper, advice on solving the limitations of applying group work in school is provided, which will



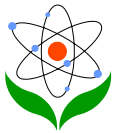
hopefully be useful for other teachers and students.

Background

I, as a primary school teacher in the Hong Kong SAR, attended the International On-line Collaboration Discussion Seminar by the Schools Around the World (SAW) Project, which was held between October 15 and November 4, 2001. During this 3-week seminar, teachers from six out of the nine SAW participating nations or regions (the United States, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Portugal and Hong Kong) had the opportunity to exchange their ideas, and to express their professional opinions based on their teaching experiences on implementing group work in the classroom. In particular, the following three topics were explored within the seminar: defining group work, the role of assessment in group work, and teachers' professional development for supporting the implementation of group work. This paper focuses on what I discussed with the SAW participants during the 3-week on-line seminar, plus some additional points I wish to share relating to this topic.

Introduction

In Hong Kong primary schools, 'group work' is always tied to 'activity-based learning', which means teachers arranging some group activities mainly for students' discussion of a particular topic or question during the lesson or students' group projects as homework assignment. In general, five to six students is the group size for setting up a discussion. From my point of view, the process of group work should involve thinking, participating, sharing, discussing, brainstorming, cooperating, communicating, compromising, deciding and concluding among group members. 'Group work' is a student-centered learning method that encourages students to think deeply and express their own ideas to others, and it is not simply for students sitting in the classroom and receiving the knowledge from teachers or textbooks. In the process of group work, the relationship between peers becomes closer.



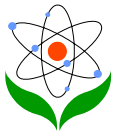
Group work can be implemented in all grades and subjects. However, teachers should confirm students' previous knowledge and make sure the students understand the aims and instructions of the work. I think that group work is better when it is applied in a practical way, such as with problem solving, which can consolidate the theoretical knowledge. Besides, teacher should pay attention to classroom management, controlling each group's working progress and providing assistance if necessary.

In successful group work, students should have equal participation, and display a positive attitude with the motivation to learn. When gathering the students into groups, teacher should consider students' individual ability and make sure every student is involved in the group work. Also, students should have enough time and clear instructions to follow. The most important thing is that the assessment should be based on the process rather than just the output.

Practical Experience of Group Work in Hong Kong

I designed 'Infectious Disease' as the group work topic in General Studies for my Primary Five students. The main reason for choosing this as the theme was based on students' previous knowledge in General Studies, and the fact that infectious disease is a common phenomenon in Asia. During the implementation of the group work, I cooperated with the librarian because he could provide professional knowledge in searching related resources for the students. Davis (1999) has stated that allowing students to select their own group members can work well, but this method always runs the risk of further isolating some students or creating cliques within the class as a whole. In spite of this possibility, I gave the students the right to choose their own members freely. Five or six students is an ideal group size in my mind. The larger the groups, the more likely they can handle more complex tasks in which a greater number of ideas might improve the final outcomes.

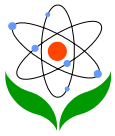
At the beginning, I provided a series of written questions to guide the group discussion. The groups were asked to make observations, comparisons, contrasts and analysis on the facts of the case. Questions included: 'What



kinds of infectious disease have we learned in the General Studies lesson? What do we know about the different kinds of infectious disease? Which kinds of infectious disease are we interested in and would like to chose as our topic?' Based on these questions, the groups decided the topic and focused on the direction of their research. For example, students could focus on the source of a particular infectious disease, the ways of spreading this infectious disease, its syndrome, its damage to health, or suggestions for preventing the infectious disease, etc. Afterwards, groups had to gather information from different sources, such as the library, Internet, through conducting interviews with people, use of other research methods or fieldwork.

I used Jigsaw as the strategy of cooperative learning. Jigsaw is excellent for tasks that have several distinct aspects or components. Each team member takes responsibility for one aspect of the problem in question (Felder, 1994). To prevent conflicts among group members, I spent a few minutes discussing the students' roles, responsibilities and my expectations for the work. I explained to students that each member of the group played a specific role. The roles included leader, encourager, reader and recorder. The leader is responsible for keeping the group on task. The encourager encourages discussion and inclusion of members' opinions, and guides the discussion towards consensus. The recorder should write down the group discussion and conclusion.

Group work does not only build up students' social skills, it is also a way to make a positive difference in learning. The groups work without my interference by adopting the non-traditional roles of witness, resource and consultant, rather than authority figure. Under continuous observation, a high percentage of group members would prefer to sit back and let 'someone else' work on their behalf. This phenomenon, which has come to be known as 'social loafing' (Latane, Williams & Harkins, 1979) can be a serious problem in classrooms and workshops because it heavily constrains the interaction necessary for a productive learning environment. Furthermore, the conditions that produce social loafing can prevent the development of the social fabric that is necessary for effectively functioning learning groups. More assertive members will inevitably 'take charge' and, by doing



so, will both reduce the need for additional input and create a sort of a 'caste' system in which quieter members often feel that their ideas might not be welcomed (Michaelsen, Fink & Knight, 1997). Therefore, I encouraged students to express their own opinions in groups freely.

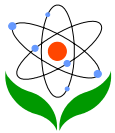
After the group discussion, I discussed with the groups about presenting their ideas to the public. For primary students, it is quite difficult to present their output using slides or transparencies. Finally, some of the groups chose to do a role-play, record a video or tape, make a bookmark or do a PowerPoint presentation.

At the end of the group work activity, I designed a simple evaluation form for the groups. The feedback from the students was positive. They really enjoyed the learning process and they considered to be more confident when expressing themselves in public in the future.

The Role of Assessment of Group Work

According to Johnson & Johnson (1994), the role of teacher as an effective assessor in group processing is to ensure that each student and each group gives and receives feedback on the effectiveness of task work and teamwork; to analyze and reflect on the feedback that the students and groups receive; to help individuals and groups set goals for improving their work; and, to encourage the celebration of members' hard work and the group's success.

From my point of view, assessment in group work should not involve assigning grades. The emphasis is on assessing learning outcomes through performance measures. Of course a grade for any group work will usually be supplemented in the students' final grade with midterm or final examinations. Individual accomplishment in the group work itself should be assessed so that members' contributions to the groups are evaluated accordingly. Teachers must decide on the criteria used to evaluate student performance and plan how to collect the information in order to make judgments. Also, they have to define the process of learning and facilitate



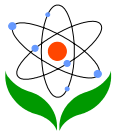
students to reach the criteria.

The assessment should focus on both the processes and the outcomes of learning. Teachers should measure the quality and quantity of student outcomes to assess how much students have actually learned in group work. Performance-based assessment requires students to demonstrate what they can do with what they know by performing a procedure or skill. In a performance-based assessment, students complete or demonstrate the same behaviour that the teacher intends to measure. Students may submit assessment compositions, journal articles, exhibitions, demonstrations, video projects, science experiments, lab reports, surveys or oral presentations.

When assessing student performance, teachers need an appropriate method of sampling the desired performances and a clearly articulated set of criteria to serve as the basis for evaluative judgments. Although teachers cannot assess all learning outcomes in group work, they can assess student learning mainly by observing, and through self- and peer evaluation.

To supplement traditional evaluation procedures, such as testing and collecting samples of students' work, teachers may wish to assess learning through direct observation during group work and provide formative feedback to the group. Observing also provides teachers with feedback about the appropriateness of the task (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). It involves recording what students do while they work together to complete a task and also allows teachers to effectively assess students' work and understanding. Clarke, Wideman, and Eadie (1990) offer the following suggestions for conducting systematic observations.

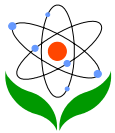
1. Tell students what task and social skills will be observed.
2. Decide how many groups to observe and for how long.
3. Be unobtrusive; avoid hovering over student groups while they are working.
4. Prepare observation sheets, such as checklists, in advance.
5. Use one observation sheet for each group.
6. Make notes or jot down questions that come to mind which may not fit into the categories on the observation sheet.



After the observation, teachers can give feedback to the whole class or to particular groups about the effective and ineffective behaviours observed. Whenever possible, teachers should positively emphasize effective behaviours rather than focusing on negative ones only. This enables teachers and students to clarify problems, consider solutions, and set new goals to improve their outputs.

Team members are responsible for the quality of group work so teachers must assess and evaluate each student's achievement in the group. Teachers should lead their students in an effective sharing and reflection session after group work activity. This can be done by conducting self- and peer evaluations to help groups reflect upon and analyze their work. For self-assessment, students identify their own contributions to the overall group learning achievement. Teachers can give each group member an assessment checklist or questionnaire for self-assessment. For example, teacher can give students series of questions to evaluate their interpersonal skills ("How did group members encourage each other's participation?"). Teachers should stress to their students that group work is an integral part of learning. Group members can then share their answers as they express what they feel they have contributed to the group work, analyze how well they worked together and improve the group's efforts. Or individuals can be called upon at random to make brief reports on the group's progress, including a description of the problems they had overcome and questions to be addressed.

If the student's ability and class size allow, they can offer feedback to other groups. To help students fairly evaluate other groups' work, the teacher can provide evaluation guidelines for students to score group work, for example, on a scale of one to five to measure the degree of addressing and clarifying major issues. During peer evaluation, teachers can share with the class the results of their observations. It is a good idea to make a record of students' group achievement, this allows students to see how much they have improved using a particular set of skills over a fixed period of time. Students should be asked to discuss in groups the things that they did to help each other learn and be prepared to share the results with their classmates. Again, an evaluation form can be provided that for group members to rate



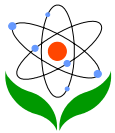
their peers (Davis, 1999) in areas such as their professionalism (their attendance at group meetings, participating appropriately), their initiative (suggesting ideas, working constructively toward common goals), and their independence (completion of tasks at agreed-upon deadlines, researching the topic and sharing resources).

By explaining the group evaluation task, before the group work begins, students will probably express less discomfort with the ideas, and will feel peer pressure to contribute and work toward the common goal. Most students, indeed, are concerned about their image and do not want to appear as being foolish or irresponsible among their classmates. Learning groups and their members need continual feedback on each member's level of learning. When assessing individual contribution, group members should provide immediate feedback to each other. However, students may lack experience in peer evaluation and worry about offending their classmates so there may be difficulties in evaluating one another, especially when the evaluation is negative. Therefore, teachers have to relieve students' pressure during evaluation.

After students have completed self- and peer assessment with feedbacks from each other, teachers should guide students to set some goals for improvement specifically on how their learning becomes more effective in the future. The goals should be reviewed at the beginning of the next group activity session.

Professional Support for Teachers in Group Work

Before leading group work activities in classes, teachers must conceptually understand the nature of cooperative learning, its step-by-step approach; and the expectations for its effective implementation. At the same time, the introduction of such innovative and non-conventional educational strategy requires teachers' enthusiasm. Teachers' skills and training in cooperative learning, their enthusiasm and attitudes, will affect their selection of cooperative learning methods and success in implementation. If a teacher is knowledgeable, confident, and enthusiastic about cooperative learning, the probability of an effective and enjoyable cooperative learning experience for



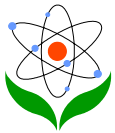
both teachers and students will be greater. If not, cooperative learning will only become a passing fad.

One of the most constructive contributions we can make to enhance the teaching and learning effectiveness is to encourage cooperation among teachers and the use of cooperative learning in the classroom. Encouraging teacher cooperation is as important as reinforcing it among students. It is essential that teachers can establish goals in cooperative learning through the interdependence and interaction among teachers. Providing feedback about each other's teaching can help to improve teaching skills. Team teaching, collaborating in social studies curricula, establishing support groups in which teachers providing help and assistance to each other, coordinating strategies for teaching difficult students - are examples of positive interaction among teachers. Finally, these efforts will immensely increase our enjoyment of teaching and working in schools, as well as encouraging cooperation among students in classrooms.

There is no doubt that support groups succeed if they provide clear goals with interdependence among themselves, clear procedures, and active participation by teachers. Task-oriented problem solving, as well as empathy and mutual support, should dominate the group's climate. The three key activities of professional support group are (Little, 1981):

1. Frequent professional discussions on cooperative learning, including sharing successes.
2. Co-planning, designing, preparing, and evaluating curriculum materials to implement cooperative learning in the classrooms of members.
3. Reciprocal observations of each other teaching a cooperatively structured lesson, and joint processing of those observations.

Johnson & Johnson (1984) stated that within the professional support group, there must be frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about the use of cooperative learning procedures. Teachers can build a specific and accurate strategy, which describes the complexity of using cooperative learning procedures, distinguish one practice and its virtues from another, and integrate these procedures into other teaching practices and



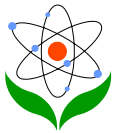
methods already in use. Through such discussion, teachers exchange information on successful procedures and materials. Besides, they can also focus on solving specific problems together and may receive help to perfect their use of cooperative learning strategies.

Limitations in Applying Group Work in Hong Kong

Attempting a new strategy is easier when there is collegial, administrative, and parental support. Available resources and classroom's physical environment may influence both the effectiveness and applications of cooperative learning. For example, some cooperative learning methods require specially prepared curriculum materials. Moreover, if the class and school climate has been primarily individualistic or competitive, teachers have to devote more time to develop a cooperative climate.

Successfully implementing cooperative learning in schools depends on creating a support and assistance system among the teachers. Teachers will not only follow the procedures of using cooperative learning but also sustain each other's interest in doing so. Due to teachers' heavy workload, professional support meetings are poorly attended. As a result, teachers' support is hard to achieve. Teachers lack the opportunity to share ideas, and support each other's efforts in using cooperative learning procedures effectively. They may feel pressured, isolated, and alienated. If teachers can meet on a regular basis to look more realistically and objectively at their implementation efforts, then close, personal, collaborative relationships will be achieved among them.

In addition, many teachers are scarred by competition among teachers in the school. In these schools, teachers feel insecure, isolated, cold, reserved, defensive, and competitive in their relationships with fellow teachers and administrators. Consequently, lack of cooperative learning decreases their teaching effectiveness in the classroom. Then, a 'professional and highly trained teacher' has already achieved sufficient competence and skill to handle all classroom situations alone. However, innovative and creative teaching is stifled by insecurity, anxiety, and competitiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). As a result, the environment is depressing and discouraging



for teachers.

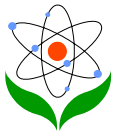
Teachers in Hong Kong only have limited flexibility in curriculum design and coverage. Teachers spend far less effort on group work as compared to developing curriculum and maintaining students' academic standards, meeting region-wide program objectives and schools' work timetables. Teachers should discuss their understanding of cooperative learning strategies; share the burden of developing lesson materials; set realistic standards for students and colleagues; and, provide advice for each other when implementing cooperative learning procedures. Collaboration of teachers' efforts for planning cooperative lessons can often create constructive results. As a result, the emphasis teachers give to decisions such as cognitive or interpersonal skill training, type of task, and type of grading will be influenced by these curriculum issues (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

Conclusion

Teaching is not a lonely profession, however, a feeling of isolation from peers and a lack of continuing professional growth are generally found among teachers in Hong Kong. Developing a clear cooperative interdependence among teachers has many advantages over encouraging competitive or individualistic relationships. Structuring teachers into professional support groups can have important effects on teacher morale as well as on the competence in using cooperative learning procedures.

Not only do teachers need to learn how to use cooperative learning procedures with students, but principals and other administrators may need to learn how to structure cooperative relationships among teachers and encourage the implementation of effective cooperative learning procedures. As principals or administrators, they should be members of the professional support group in school. They should always think in terms of staff development, not in radically changing everything the teachers are already doing.

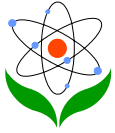
Perhaps the use of cooperative learning in Hong Kong is facing some



unresolved problems, but 'research shows that students who work in groups develop an increased ability to solve problems and evidence greater understanding of the material' (Davis, 1993). Given enough time, teachers will experience increased confidence in professional competence and students can benefit from group work. The focus of schools should be on developmental planning in this direction for two or three years. Also, it is possible for principals or administrators to provide teachers with support, encouragement, and feedback, in order for teachers to learn how to use cooperative learning procedures successfully.

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