

Improving collaborative group work

Peter Blatchford and Ed Baines, SPRinG KS2 researchers at the Institute of Education, University of London.

The SPRinG research shows that group work is a powerful but often underused strategy that teachers can use to raise attainment and active engagement in learning.

Teachers often view group work as valuable but problematic. Children's poor communication skills and behaviour are often cited as reasons for not using it, and curriculum and assessment pressures can leave little time for group work. Repeated research studies have shown that although pupils often sit in groups, they only occasionally work together *as groups*. This is no surprise because children are rarely trained for group work and teachers can lack effective strategies for setting up and managing groups.

Yet other research highlights the potential of group working for improving learning and behaviour. The main goal of the SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Group work) project was to address this gap between the potential of group work and its limited use in schools. The first phase involved teachers and researchers working together to identify classroom strategies that were most likely to make group work effective. The second phase was an evaluation of effects on pupil learning, engagement and behaviour over the course of one year, and in comparison to a control group of pupils working in everyday classrooms.

The project involved 162 classes in primary and secondary schools and 4,259 pupils across Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. Here we will focus on findings at KS2.

What did we find at KS2?

- Far from impeding learning, group work raised levels of achievement. SPRinG activities for KS2 pupils were targeted at science and led to significantly higher attainment and deeper conceptual understanding and inferential thinking. This difference is equivalent to an average pupil moving up into the top third of the class.
- Pupil behaviour improved, despite some teachers' initial worries that group work might be disruptive.
- Group work doubled pupils' levels of sustained, active engagement in learning and more than doubled the amount of high-level, thoughtful discussion between children.

There were also other benefits. Teachers found they spent less time controlling pupils and more time supporting learning. Some found that group work helped children improve relationships with peers. Group work seems to be most beneficial when adopted by the whole school, rather than individual teachers.

What makes SPRinG distinctive?

The SPRinG approach applies group work across the curriculum, and integrates it into everyday school life. It recognises concerns and difficulties connected with group work. Each class was asked to undertake at least two one-hour group-work sessions per week.

The SPRinG programme has three key principles.

- It stresses that supportive relationships and group-work skills have to be developed: we cannot just put children into groups and expect them to work well together. Activities help children communicate effectively through listening, explaining and sharing ideas, but also help them trust and respect each other, and plan, organise and evaluate their group work.
- It provides guidance on how teachers can adapt grouping practices for different learning objectives. The key aim is to support children in taking responsibility for their own learning.
- The classroom and groups need to be carefully organised. Adapting classroom-seating arrangements and characteristics of groups such as their size, composition and stability over time can make group work a more constructive.

The key principles and activities are set out in a handbook for teachers. According to one KS2 teacher “the activities suggested by the SPRinG handbook were very good. I found the sessions well laid-out and easy to resource and follow. The science activities inspired me to look for more interesting activities elsewhere. I found myself using group work across the curriculum. We were learning and having fun at the same time.”

A teacher's experience of SPRinG

Jodie Corbett a teacher at St James & St Michael's school in London describes how SPRinG transformed her difficult class.

“After the initial SPRinG icebreakers the next phase of the programme involved forming stable groups. We watched and supported groups of children as they sometimes argued and sulked. We were very tempted to split them up, but the researchers said it was important that the children worked through these difficulties with adult support. After a while we realised that the noise we could hear was actually productive noise. They weren't arguing or talking about last night's *EastEnders*, they were actively engaged with the work.

Top tips from SPRinG teachers

1. Group size: small is usually best

Group work is more effective at KS2 when it involves no more than four children. When introducing group work, pairs and threes should be used most. Once skills and confidence have developed, group size can be adjusted to reduce or increase the complexity of a task.

2. Proximity reduces noise

A common concern about group work is that it creates a noisy classroom. One way to reduce noise is to arrange seating so that children in a group are closer together, for example, by seating them around a single table.

3. Encourage pupils to reflect on and adapt their skills

SPRinG has helped groups develop a supportive ethos in which pupils work more autonomously. Achieving this takes time and effort. SPRinG recommends briefing and debriefing at the start and end of lessons which enables pupils to evaluate the skills they need to improve group work.

4. Teachers as a 'guide on the side'

Teachers and teaching assistants can be overly supportive and directive. Adults can best support learning during group work by acting as facilitators or 'guides on the side', e.g., by asking open ended questions, making general suggestions and encouraging pupils to get information more independently.

As a class they can now work together for sustained periods and solve problems together. Their behaviour and attitude to learning are good.”

What can we conclude?

Group work offers learning possibilities for pupils not provided by either teacher-led or individual work, and can help to improve attitudes to work and classroom behaviour. We hope that this project will lead to more systematic use of group work. It deserves to be given a much more central role in educational policy and school practice.

Further information is available from: www.spring-project.org.uk

Project directors: Maurice Galton (Cambridge – KS3), Peter Kutnick (Brighton – KS1) and Peter Blatchford (Institute of Education, London – KS2).

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The SPR*in*G handbook for teachers will be available from Routledge in spring 2007.