

Toward a social pedagogy of class work



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ABSTRACT

In any classroom, pupils will be drawn together for many purposes and we can refer to such within classroom contexts as 'groupings'. The teacher often creates these, and the way that they are set up, and how they are used for particular learning purposes. If the relationships between grouping size, interaction type and learning tasks in groups are planned strategically then learning experiences will be more effective. However, research suggests that the relationships between these elements are often unplanned and the 'social pedagogic' potential of classroom learning is therefore unrealised. In this paper we explore the notion of social pedagogy in relation to group work. It is argued that research and theory relevant to group work in classrooms is limited, and that a new approach, sensitive to group work under everyday classroom conditions is required. This paper identifies key features of a social pedagogy of classroom group work, which can inform effective group work in classrooms. It also describes the background to a current large scale UK project which has been set up to design with teachers a programme of high quality group work in classrooms at both primary and secondary phases.

Keywords- Social pedagogy; Groupwork; Collaboration; Authentic classrooms

1. The case for group work

At the first Annual Conference of the UKESRC funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme, there was an address by an invited American speaker-Lauren Resnick. She proposed an approach to pedagogy that she hoped would act as the basis of a new drive in educational reform in the USA, and which would help raise the cognitive competence and educational achievement of the least educationally advantaged children (Resnick, 2000). Drawing on now well-established approaches in psychology, she identified two core features of a new pedagogy. The first she called 'knowledge-based constructivism'-a deliberate oxymoron that was meant to capture the now well understood interpretive, inferential basis of learning, as well as the responsibility of an educational system to provide learners with high quality material from which they can construct.

The second core component of a new approach to pedagogy draws on social devel-

opmental and motivational theory and is called by Resnick 'effort-based learning'. She argues that it is important not to socialise learners into inhibiting views of their own learning and intelligence. Drawing on ideas by Carol Dweck, she argues it is important for learners to adopt an 'incremental' not an 'entity' theory of their own intelligence, and it is important for learners to acquire robust and enduring 'habits of mind' that assume effort and application are important in learning.

1.1. What is group work?

It should be clear that there is more to group work than sitting students in groups and asking them to work together. There may be talk between pupils of course but this can be relatively low level and not about the work in hand, and rarely in service of a joint activity. By group work we mean pupils working together as a group or team.

The teacher may be involved at various stages but the particular feature of group work- perhaps its defining characteristic- is that the balance of ownership and control of the work shifts

toward the pupils themselves. Group work should involve children as co-learners (Zajac & Hartup, 1997), not just one pupil helping another. We have an inclusive view of group work-and would include what is sometimes called cooperative group work-but see the group basis for classroom learning extending beyond this particular approach.

Whereas cooperative group work is often associated with particularly structured groups, often with a heterogeneous mixture of ability, gender and ethnicity, and particular learning tasks, pupils may, during their everyday classroom activities, be asked to undertake group work for a variety of tasks and in a variety of groupings.

For group work to be effective, pupils and teachers must be adaptable to normal classroom conditions, which will involve a classroom populated by many other children.

2. Background: The current place of group work in UK schools

2.1. Policy on groups

We only comment here on policy regarding UK schools though it is our experience that the general situation is similar in many other countries. The overriding conclusion is that group work as just defined has a very minor role in government policy. Recent government legislation and advice, e.g., on literacy and numeracy strategies, and on science at KS3 (11-14 years), rarely mention group work. Importantly, when group work is mentioned, e.g., in the suggested format for the 'literacy hour' in primary schools, it is in effect a teacher or adult led context, little different pedagogically from whole class teaching, or individual work when seated in groups.

A central tenet of this paper is that group work does not have the place it deserves in the school curriculum. A connected point is that debate and policy on grouping is not yet informed by good empirical research. Research to date does not provide sufficient information to help

teachers apply such strategies effectively within normal classroom contexts.

2.2. The current state of group work in UK schools

Accounts of the use of groups in primary classrooms, particularly in the UK (Bennett, Desforges, Cockburn, & Wilkinson, 1984; Blatchford, Kutnick, & Baines, 1999; Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber Wall, & Pell, 1999; Kutnick & Rogers, 1994), demonstrate that there is little strategic planning of pupil grouping in primary schools, and that it is viewed by many teachers as problematic.

In an often quoted finding, Galton et al. (1980), showed that within the majority of primary classrooms children sit in groups but rarely interact and work as groups. Instead, pupils work individually or as a whole class. When sitting together in an environment that does not support productive group work, pupils can be drawn off-task by social talk. Furthermore, a replication study two decades later showed only a slight decrease in pupil social interaction in favour of task related exchanges within groups.

Even then, these task-focused interactions between pupils mainly involved exchanging information rather than discussing ideas (Galton et al 1999).

3. Experimental research on the effectiveness of working in groups

Experimental research on the effectiveness of within-class groupings has demonstrated positive, albeit modest, effects on pupil achievement, better attitudes (particularly in multi-cultural settings) and improved social climate within classrooms (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Pepitone, 1980; Slavin, 1990). This research is mainly based on small groups, predominantly explores the effects of a highly structured co-operative framework, experimentally restructures classes into grouped (or non-grouped) situations, and typi-

cally provides a specific mandatory training programme for teachers in the management of co-operative groups. Many of these studies have been evaluated in meta-analytic and other reviews (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Lou et al., 1996; Slavin, 1987).

These reviews demonstrate that with training and support teachers using small groups can enhance certain forms of pupil learning.

4. Theoretical approaches to learning and classroom settings

Over the last century, researchers in the psychological tradition, from Baldwin (1897) through to Vygotsky (1978) and including earlier writings of Rogoff (1928) and Piaget (1959), have underlined the importance of interaction between social, affective and cognitive states in development and learning and have thus provided a theoretical rationale for the use of groupings in instructional settings. These ideas have promoted the view that children's thinking is a function of prior knowledge and the individual's capacity to learn with help from either adults or peers (Rogoff, 1990; Wood, 1998) and, as a result, led to an emphasis on the benefits of peer tutoring, collaborative and cooperative learning for cognitive development (c.f. Damon & Phelps, 1989; Light & Perret-Clermont, 1991). There are also as-

pects of association, reinforcement and practice in instructional learning tasks (as defined by Norman, 1978; and elaborated by Edwards, 1994) that have implications for relationships between teachers and pupils and learning in classrooms.

Conclusions

We started this paper by citing Resnick's belief in two main features of a new pedagogy for the classroom- 'knowledge based constructivism' and 'effort based learning'. We have suggested that a third feature that could be added. We have argued that there is a need to recognise the classroom contextual features that can influence learning and behaviour in schools, and, more specifically, we have argued for the benefits of group work. It is not suggested that group work should replace other contexts of learning; clearly there is place for teacher instruction and individual work. Rather we believe that group contexts for learning are educationally significant but neglected. High quality group work is a classroom contextual feature that can aid 'knowledge based constructivism' and 'effort based learning'. We have suggested that there is a need to construct a social pedagogy that can underpin the development of use of group work in schools, and in this paper we have set out a framework, which is being used in the design of an intervention currently being evaluated.

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