

Improving pupil group work in classrooms: The SPRinG project

This research shows that group work is a powerful but underused strategy that teachers can use to:

- raise educational attainment;
- increase active engagement in learning; and
- improve classroom behaviour.

This large-scale project has developed and evaluated a new approach to group work in primary and secondary schools. It is part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The findings of this five-year study are already helping to shape classroom practice not only in England and Scotland but in the Far East and the Caribbean.

Why was the research needed?

It is understandable that the Government should want to raise educational standards. Everyone who works in schools has the same goal. Many teachers believe, however, that the current combination of curriculum and assessment pressures can result in excessively passive classes. It is also argued that more should be done to develop the 'soft' life skills that enable learners to work as a team and make decisions together. This research shows that group work can help to address all three concerns.

What have previous studies told us?

Earlier research has indicated the potential of group work to improve learning and behaviour. Unfortunately, research has also shown that this potential is not being realised in UK schools. Pupils often sit in groups, but they only occasionally interact and work as groups. Children are rarely trained for group work, while teachers lack effective strategies for setting up and managing such work in classrooms. They are also sceptical about its value and therefore tend to rely heavily on whole-class teaching and individual work.

What was SPRinG's aim?

The main goal of the SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Group work) project was to address this wide gap between the potential of group work and its limited use in schools. The project involved 162 classes in primary and secondary schools and 4,259 pupils aged 5 to 14. The research on Key Stage 1 (5-7 years), took place at the University of Brighton, on KS2 (7-11), at the Institute of Education in London, and on KS3 (11 – 14), at the University of Cambridge. This newsletter concentrates on results and experiences at KS2 but the SPRinG research suggests that group work benefits children of all ages.

What did we find?

Key finding 1: Far from impeding learning, group work has raised levels of achievement. SPRinG activities for KS2 pupils have been targeted at science and have 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.

Key finding 2: Despite some teachers' worries that group work might be disruptive, pupil behaviour actually improved in the SPR*in*G classes.

Key finding 3: Group work has doubled pupils' levels of sustained, active engagement in learning and more than doubled the amount of high-level, thoughtful discussion between children.

Other findings

- Teachers' professional skills and confidence have been enhanced and their teaching repertoire has been extended. There have also been unexpected benefits -- for example, as pupils developed group-working skills, teachers found they were 'freed' from classroom control and were able to spend more time teaching.
- Group work seems to be most effective when adopted by the whole school, rather than the individual teacher.
- Teachers working in areas of deprivation or in difficult circumstances have found that group work can be used successfully and can aid classroom relationships and integration.
- At KS1, group work helped to improve attainment in reading and mathematics and at KS3 it benefited high-level conceptual understanding.

What makes SPR*in*G distinctive?

The SPR*in*G approach applies group work across the curriculum and over the school year. We worked with teachers to develop a programme that could be successfully integrated into school life, and that recognised the concerns and difficulties they can have with group work. Each class was expected to undertake at least two one-hour SPR*in*G group-work sessions per week.

A strength of the programme is that it is based on a unique, systematic evaluation of pupil progress over a full school year, and comparison with a control group in terms of objective measures of attainment and classroom behaviour.

The SPR*in*G programme differs from other approaches to group work in that it has three key principles.

- First, it stresses the importance of supportive relationships. Group-work skills have to be developed: we cannot just put children into groups and expect them to work well together. Activities are designed to help pupils communicate effectively through listening, explaining and sharing ideas, but also to help them trust and respect each other, and plan, organise and evaluate their group work.
- Second, the programme provides guidance on how teachers can adapt grouping practices for different purposes and learning tasks. The key aim is to encourage pupil independence rather than to teach pupils directly.
- The third principle rests on the belief that for group work to be successful the classroom and groups need to be organised and managed. Teachers taking part in the SPR*in*G project have received guidance on classroom-seating arrangements, and characteristics of groups such as their size, composition and stability over time.

What strategies did SPR*in*G teachers adopt?

The key principles, along with activities for developing pupils' group-work skills, are set out in a handbook for teachers, "Improving the Effectiveness of Pupil Groups in Classrooms". Teachers have contributed greatly to its development. Among the key strategies that the handbook advocates are:

Group size: small is usually best

SPRinG recommends that group work is more effective at KS2 when it involves no more than four or five pupils. In the early stages of introducing group work, twos and threes should be used most. This eases pupils gently into group working. Once skills and confidence have developed, group size can be adjusted to reduce or increase the complexity of a task.

Briefing and debriefing

SPRinG has helped groups to develop a supportive ethos in which pupils can work more autonomously. Achieving this takes time and effort. SPRinG recommends a process of briefing and debriefing at the start and end of lessons which enables pupils to reflect on the skills they need to improve their group work. After a lesson, pupils evaluate their group interaction and consider how skills can be improved next time.

Teachers as a 'guide on the side'

Adults can best support learning during group work by not teaching directly but by acting as facilitators or 'guides on the side'. Teachers and teaching assistants tend to get over-involved in the learning process. This difficulty, and the SPRinG strategy to deal with it, are illustrated in the experience of one of our developing teachers.

Jan was trying to do more group work in her Year 5 class. However, she was frequently frustrated by pupils' passivity. They remained very dependent on her support and assistance.

Observers noticed that her interaction with groups was very directive and that she wanted the children to do the task so well that she often imposed her ideas on the group. When this was pointed out she tried changing her approach by encouraging pupils to find ways of getting the required information independently. She urged them to consult books, ask for other pupils' help and opinions, and take greater responsibility for their own ideas and decisions.

Initially, pupils were resistant to this new approach. They wanted to please their teacher and get the work 'right'. This was very stressful for Jan and she considered abandoning group work altogether, but after some time children adjusted to this new way of working. They became much more independent in their thinking and learning and began to enjoy group work much more.

What can we conclude?

Given time to develop pupils' group-working skills, teachers can transform the teaching and learning environment. 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.

SPRinG is here!

Jodie Corbett describes how SPRinG transformed her classroom practice

The class lists were posted on the wall. Yes, my Year 4/5 children were *the* difficult class of the next school year. I approached September determined to succeed. By the end of the year I wanted to have transformed the class. But how?

The kids had poor social skills, low self-esteem and a very poor attitude towards work. The class had quite a high turnover of children and there was a high percentage of learners with special needs and English as an additional language. What was I to do with them?

A leaflet on SPRinG arrived in my pigeonhole and I turned up at the first session curious as to how group work could help me. What if it made things even worse? What if it involved lots of additional work? With trepidation I tried my first two activities. Both involved a lot of physical contact and, judging by previous experience, I was prepared for arguments, cuts and bruises. But no -- to my amazement I witnessed cooperation and enjoyment.

After the initial games and icebreakers the next phase of the programme involved forming stable groups. In order to encourage the children to work together I had to do some careful manoeuvring of furniture. In a very small classroom with a thin partition wall separating us from a nose-to-the-grindstone Year 5/6 this was no mean feat! It might have taken some time but we soon had it down to a quick (and finally quiet) art. We were ready.

For a few weeks I and my two colleagues – a teaching assistant and a learning support assistant -- observed the children working. We quickly identified the pupils who saw group work as a 'free ride' and those who would need support. We tried different combinations of children and following a few tweaks we had the groups firmly established.

Now came the difficult part. We watched and supported groups of children as they argued, shouted 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.

For a long time all we could 'see' was noise and disruption. But 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.

The activities suggested by the SPRinG handbook were very good. I found the sessions well laid-out and easy to resource and follow. This level of transparency is the key to success in the classroom as all good teachers already know. 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.

As a class they can now work together for sustained periods and solve problems together. Their behaviour and attitude to learning are good. They are no longer the difficult class.

Jodie Corbett is a teacher in an inner London school.

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