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BUILDING UP CONNECTIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF GROUP WORK IN THE CLASSROOM

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This article is intended to discuss the topic of group work in the classroom, a method often present in day-to-day class organization, emphasizing its role in fostering relationships, improving academic performance, and preparing students for future collaborative endeavours. Group work is a well-known and highly spread alternative instruction method replacing the classic frontal one. School is not merely a place of acquiring knowledge; it is a social endeavour that fosters several essential life skills like communication, collaboration, and community-building. One of the most effective ways to nurture these skills in students is through group work. Using it in the classroom provides an opportunity for students to build connections, enhance their learning experience, and develop crucial interpersonal skills that are essential in both academic and professional settings.

Keywords: *group work, education, communication, connection, responsibility, learning abilities.*

STABILIM CONEXIUNI: IMPORTANŢA LUCRULUI ÎN ECHIPĂ ÎN SALA DE CLASĂ

Acest articol își propune să aducă în discuție tematica lucrului în echipă în sala de clasă, o metodă des întâlnită în organizarea zilnică a orelor de curs, subliniind rolul acesteia în dezvoltarea relațiilor interpersonale, a îmbunătățirii performanței academice și a pregătirii elevilor pentru viitoare activități colaborative. Lucrul în echipă este o metodă bine cunoscută și răspândită fiind considerate ca o alternativă de instruire care înlocuiește metoda clasică frontală. Școala nu este doar un loc de dobândire a cunoștințelor, dar este o activitate socială care promovează mai multe abilități esențiale de viață, cum ar fi comunicarea, colaborarea și construirea de comunități. Una dintre cele mai eficiente modalități de a cultiva aceste abilități la elevi este prin lucrul în echipă. Folosirea acestuia în sala de clasă le oferă elevilor oportunitatea de a stabili conexiuni, de a-și îmbunătăți experiența de învățare și de a dezvolta abilități interpersonale esențiale atât în mediul academic, cât și în cel profesional.

Cuvinte-cheie*: lucrul în echipă, educație, comunicare, conexiuni, responsabilitate, abilități de învățare.*

Introduction

In a world of constant change where teachers must be more than just information providers, the classroom organization system must keep its pace with smart, curious and better-informed students. A more appropriate way of teaching has yet to be discovered, and it seem that the classical school system is still the best alternative for children to get the appropriate qualifications and information to help them move to a prosperous adulthood.

The classroom is very different now than it was 10 years ago, for example: teachers use online lessons to teach, and students read eBooks nowadays. These years have been marked by innovation and development in the learning environments [1]. But changes have been made in the practical organization of the classroom as well. The frontal way of instruction has been replaced by group work. It does not matter if it is for teaching, consolidation or evaluation, teachers have learned to adapt and improve themselves hoping to make students fascinated by their classes. These changes in the classroom have been defined by the term "innovative pedagogy", ironically a topic found inside the traditional classroom [2].

The traditional classroom, which most people are familiar with, is primarily characterized by emphasis on verbal communication. In this setting, the teacher delivers lessons to the entire class at once, engaging in direct instruction. This method allows the teacher to spread "school knowledge", though there are occasional moments of limited dialogue, often involving one student at a time [1-2].

This so-called school knowledge could be reduced to a list of terms to be memorized. This way of teach-

ing worked perfectly in the past to prepare graduates for traditional workplaces, but now it proves itself less effective. There seems to be an increasing need to redefine the face of the modern education system [3].

In 1975 Professor Malcom Knowls published a text that argued the importance of proactive, self-directed learning [4]. Even if his research was directed towards adult learning, nevertheless his points can be used in pedagogy as well. One of his main focuses is the development of the independent learner. Achieving this goal for students requires establishing certain principles to organize a learning environment that fosters such development. These principles may include motivation, flexibility, openness to new experiences, self-acceptance, and, ultimately, evaluation. The last factor in its turn includes providing a flexible learning environment that stimulates self-motivation, encouraging choice between learners, and creating opportunities not only for teacher-student evaluation, but for student self-evaluation as well.

It seems that recent models, ranging from child education to adult learning theories, all aim to help develop the ability to independently and actively shape cognitive understanding through meaningful interactions with the world during real learning experiences [5].

Making Connections and Taking Responsibility: Keys to Academic and Personal Growth

Young students make the most ingenious connections. These are linked to their logic and help them learn and discover new things. Ellen Galinsky calls it an` `aha`` moment [6]. Making connections begins with simple sorting and categorizing such as the fact that when seeing a spoon and a fork one knows they go together and are used to eat food or the fact that one can recognize a person in a photo as being that real person. These skills will be used in all subjects in school. Later in life, especially in adulthood, making connections involves a more personal perspective. It helps to make connections with peers and exchange ideas [6]. Adding to this, Professor Adele Diamond says ”the essence of creativity is to be able to disassemble and recombine elements in new ways.” [6, p. 17]. And it seems that in the information-overloaded world of today and tomorrow, creative thinkers have an edge, as Kathy Hirsh-Pasek points out: ”In a Google generation, where there are facts at your fingertips, the person who will later be called boss will be the person who can put those facts together in new and innovative and creative ways” [6, p. 17].

To foster these abilities, primary school students have a lot to learn through group work. It encourages teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills, each student contributing with their own knowledge to help others succeed as well. Collaborating with peers helps them develop empathy, respect for different perspectives, and the ability to work towards shared goals. These experiences lay the foundation for future success, as strong interpersonal skills are crucial in higher education and the workplace. But all these communicative skills mentioned above seem to have become lost to many students due to their social life being moved online.

Teachers worldwide can state the same thing when it comes to their students: all seem less eager to engage in activities, are losing interest in school knowledge, pick up information from all sorts of obscure internet sources and their social circle has moved on social platforms.

Implementing group work inside the classroom, starting with primary school students could help improve many of these personal setbacks and even classroom dynamics and help them take charge of their personal learning process.

If perceptions are important, then students› views on personal responsibility and its role in learning demand close attention. There are teachers that argue that many young adults entering university lack a strong sense of personal accountability for their education and fail to recognize how their attitudes and behaviours influence their peers› learning experiences [7]. Some state that this could be very well connected to their early education and that traditional instruction could be very much at fault here. This has been linked to various negative outcomes as well, including poor communication skills, ineffective teamwork, and missed learning opportunities [7]. Additionally, extensive research highlights the connection between individual responsibility and academic success.

But why is it so important to grow personal responsibility?

Research has shown that personal responsibility positively influences learning outcomes [8]. When individuals take ownership of their learning, they enhance their educational experience by actively engaging

rather than leaving it to chance [9]. This self-directed approach fosters a sense of agency that supports long-term growth and development [8]. Furthermore, it helps students recognize that the quality of their education depends not only on what is provided to them but also on their own effort and engagement.

However, schools play a critical role in fostering student success by promoting effort, engagement, interaction, and deep learning. This much needed collaborative approach, where both students and teachers share responsibility can be stimulated through group work, to create an environment that supports meaningful and sustained learning. This perspective highlights the idea that students are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their learning journey and this is exactly what groupwork has as its main purpose. Giving students a sense of control that transforms into a feeling of power to achieve better academic results.

Developing Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills

Between members of every community arise all sorts of disputes that do not always end in a peaceful and equal justice for all. In the same way, a classroom functions as a small society gathering students from all kinds of backgrounds and having all sorts of behaviours. Adding to all this the fact that activities are organized into groups of pupils, it can become a very challenging and stressful situation for a teacher [10-11-12].

Children`s problem- solving skills represent a key feature in the development of many social competences. It helps them cope with different levels of stress, take good decisions in critical moments or simply to get along with their peers.

The power of problem-solving skills lies in three areas. Firstly, they can be used very easily by young students and can be used at any time. Secondly, they are beneficial when dealing with a challenging behaviour that needs to be corrected. And thirdly, it helps them solve relationship problems [10-13].

These skills are of great importance to young students because they can stop the development of aggressive and antisocial behaviours that could very well ruin the path towards a social-functioning adult.

The teacher stands as a mediator to these possible conflicts and must have a deep understanding of the classroom environment to defuse any possible unpleasant situations. Keeping in mind that groups must be arranged equally, and one must not place conflicting personalities together, the teacher has at his/her disposal four basic questions that are meant to help deal with conflicts and these are [12-13].

1.What is the problem?

It is very important for children and young students to pay attention to their feelings and to look back at what caused the conflicting situation to take place in the first place. It is possible that there are some pre-existing disagreements that have surfaced due to a certain situation. Nonetheless, the teacher must help the group understand the path that led to conflict and try to guide them towards mutual understanding [13].

2. What are the possible solutions?

Students need to understand that there is never a miraculous solution to their problems and that being aggressive will only make things worse. This is why the teacher must help young students find alternative solutions to common disagreements and to stimulate them to generate solutions independently [13].

3. What can happen next?

After students have practiced coming up with multiple solutions to a problem, they can start assessing the potential outcomes [13].

4. Give the solution a try?

At this stage, young students learn to implement the best solution they have come up with. They are also guided on how to respond when a solution does not work [13].

Decision-making and problem-solving abilities are fundamental cognitive processes essential in all aspects of life. In the teaching-learning environment, students actively engage in decision-making and problem-solving experiences, and their outcomes align with how effectively they apply these skills. As a result, the ability to make sound decisions and manage this process efficiently can influence their life trajectory, overall satisfaction, academic success, and social relationships. Mastering these skills is especially crucial for young students, as it enhances their ability to navigate challenges and make informed choices.

A Few Ideas for Using Group Work in the Classroom

Using group work in the classroom changes many of the teacher's usual practices. If it were to talk about teaching new notions, consolidation or even evaluation, all these topics must be suited for this new environment. Some challenges might be faced when it comes to individual evaluation, but these setbacks can be overcome through a combination of individual-colleague evaluation, as exemplified later in this paper.

On the first hand, one of the things that changed while using group work has been the type of language used during the presentation of new items. If one were to talk about the principles of teaching grammar all are familiar with the classic scheme of symbols each designating a particular grammatical construct. An interesting strategy could be to replace such sterile presentations with a more informal way of teaching.

The group of children that experimented this language replacement consisted of a group of 16 third grade students divided in four groups. The main objective of the lesson was to familiarize the students with the topic of Present Tense Simple. The classic grammar construction looks like this: S(3rd person singular)+V+ -s,-es,-ies, where S stands for subject, V for verb and -s,-es and -ies are the specific endings added to the verb. This kind of teaching can become extremely tricky for young children, and they never seem to understand the logic behind it. Some of them have the tendency to learn it by heart but when asked what each letter represents, they all fail to show logical understanding. Furthermore, during consolidation hours many do not remember the pronouns that demand a certain verb ending (he, she, it) and again they are faced with having to memorize sentences.

To improve the children's understanding of the grammar issue one could resort to a kind of rephrasing of the theory behind Present Tense Simple and this can be achieved by a simple replacement of the patters presented above with the following statement: we have got 3 very special and arrogant people (he, she, it) and they always want something at the end of the verb. This small change has brought a huge difference in grammar teaching. Kids have a better understanding of such abstract notions when taught in their day-to-day vocabulary.

On the other hand, another improvement has been noticed during consolidation classes that are organized in groups. A distinct way of assessing student`s knowledge could be made by asking one member of the group to be the teacher for the rest of the children in the group. Under the teacher`s supervision each student will begin by making sure that they all know the theory behind the lesson and revise several examples that have already been discussed in the classroom. A specific thing that has been noticed during this activity has been the use of the notebook. The students' notebooks are never closed and they can look up anything they want. This way the teacher replaces the classic short-term memorization with the actual logical understanding of the topic, this in term leading to permanent memorization.

Adding to all the activities mentioned before, comes the most difficult stage of all. How can one evaluate individual progress while using group work?

There is always the opportunity for project-based learning, where the students have been each assigned a task to complete for a common goal. Of course, there will always be differences between the pupils and these tasks will be given in accordance with their abilities to make sure each brings equal contribution.

Another type of evaluation is that made by the colleagues in the group where they can state their opinion concerning the implication of a student to the wellbeing of the whole group. This is a subjective type of evaluation and can never be transformed in grades. But, nonetheless, it is a great opportunity to manage group stress and to solve potential communication issues.

At last, evaluation must be in the hands of the teacher, he/she is the only one that can assure objectiveness. For this step, classic individual evaluation can be used by devising small unique tests for all members of the group and to make things even more interesting the students are allowed to look up information in their notebooks. If it were to talk about grammar schemes or similar exercises, the use of the notebook promotes active learning, curiosity and revision all in one. This way the teacher can give full responsibility to the student`s entire class work. Paying attention in class and working all the exercises to make sure they have a test model can assure the best test grade.

General Conclusions

Group work in primary school plays a crucial role in fostering problem-solving skills, making meaningful connections, and instilling a sense of responsibility in students. By engaging in collaborative activities, children develop the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and work towards shared goals. These experiences not only enhance their academic performance but also prepare them for future challenges in higher education and professional environments.

Moreover, group work helps students build strong social bonds, teaching them the importance of empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. As they interact with peers from diverse backgrounds, they learn to navigate different perspectives and resolve conflicts constructively. These interpersonal skills are essential for their personal and professional growth, equipping them with the ability to work effectively in teams.

Additionally, taking responsibility within a group setting encourages students to become more accountable for their learning. When students recognize the impact of their contributions, they develop a sense of ownership over their education, leading to increased motivation and engagement. By integrating group work into classroom practices, educators can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that nurtures independent thinkers, problem solvers, and responsible individuals ready to face the future.

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