Group Work

Rewarding Learning

Group Work: Suggestions for using the advice and guidance materials as part of a CPD programme.

The advice and guidance materials available in this section include an overview of the main issues with implementing group work in primary and post-primary school settings. There is also related supporting material, including a PowerPoint presentation and several PDF documents. If your school wishes to focus on developing this approach at whole-school level, it can use them to develop an in-house CPD programme on group work.

Materials available:

1. PDF Group Work: Detailing main issues with implementing group work approaches at classroom level.

This paper outlines the current thinking about the benefits and drawbacks of group work as a classroom strategy. It includes reference to the work of several prominent educationalists and draws on the research that suggests group work/collaborative learning approaches can be used to improve outcomes for learners. It includes practical suggestions for implementing group work and contains links to further reading. The main argument is in favour of using group work, but under the right conditions.

2. PDF Teacher's Notes: Running group work activities

A key focus for successful group work activities is to improve the quality of the talk that takes place during peer interactions. The talk becomes firmly set on the topic the group has been given to work on and learn about. The teacher needs to lead the development of purposeful talk by introducing classroom routines for group work. The notes here introduce some ways to develop routines for group work.

3. PDF/Word: How to talk together in a group

This is a checklist for groups to use, supported by the principles outlined in the teacher's notes. Teachers can use or customise the checklist to help pupils to develop procedures for group work such as turn taking and not speaking all at once. This activity will be most beneficial for younger pupils and pupils who are unfamiliar with group work.

4. PDF/Word: Our group work rules

Pupils summarise their thinking and identify their top five rules. They use these agreed rules as the starting point for purposeful group working.

5. PowerPoint presentation: Group work

The PowerPoint summarises the main issues that are detailed in the full paper on group work. This can be used by whoever is leading the session to share the main ideas with those who will be involved. The person that leads the session should be familiar with the material in the paper on group work, and able to use or adapt the speaker's notes to elaborate on the main points.

6. Appendix 1: Checklist for effective group work

The appendix to the main paper on group work is available as a separate downloadable PDF that participants can use to monitor their own planning and delivery of group work approaches with their classes.

A suggested approach based on the Learning Leaders model

Many studies that have examined the effectiveness of CPD interventions have found that successful CPD is a long-term undertaking. Making group work *work* is likely to take some time and requires sustained effort.

If your school chooses to make group work a focus for a CPD programme, a good approach would be that a group of colleagues work together over the course of an academic year to fully explore the implications of using group work to improve learners' outcomes. The group can then identify their priorities based on their work, sharing what they have learned. The initial cohort could lead a second group of colleagues in improving the effectiveness of group working activities. Such a programme will need the support of senior management, and would benefit from having a senior leader oversee the process.

Making refinements to group working routines is largely a question of enhanced planning. Teachers should design activities and lessons so that group working happens efficiently and effectively. Such planning takes time, so participants need the backing of senior management to have enough extra time to do so.

- Begin by deciding who will be involved, using enthusiasts for group work in the first instance.
- Review the PowerPoint, and discuss the implications for classroom practice of the issues raised.
- Ask participants to read the full text of the PDF paper.
- At various points, come together as a group to discuss priorities for action.
- Give individual participants specific fact-finding tasks, and ask them to report back to the group at the next meeting.

- Consider the potential of identifying what experiences of group work pupils have already had. Might it be worth visiting feeder schools to gain a better picture?
- Following the initial meetings, the group should set the scope for what they want to achieve at personal, group and whole-school levels. They should establish parameters for success and agree on timeframes. All participants should then review their schemes of work to identify one or more occasions where they already use a group work approach, or could adapt an existing activity to include group work.
- Working in pairs or in a group of three, participants can critique each other's plans as they prepare for their first enhanced group work activity.
- Later, the same groups can review what happened, suggest changes, or note successes.
- If colleagues are willing, and if facilities are available, some participants might videotape lessons involving group work, and later scrutinise what took place. While initially daunting, such exercises can be enormously revealing, both to the teacher leading the session and to observers.
- Perhaps once a term the whole set of participants should meet and pool their findings, reviewing their progress against the agreed goals.
- At the end of the year, the participants should meet again to share their findings, and to create a set of recommendations on how to proceed with group work, based on their experiences. These recommendations will form the basis for a report to SMT.