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# Small Group Work for Students with Special Needs

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*"When I'm in a group with other students, I feel like part of the class."*

*"When I do my work alone in my seat, I sometimes get confused. But when I do my work with other kids, we figure out together what we're supposed to do."*

*"It's just better for me to work together on things. We help each other, it's faster, and just more fun!"*

These comments are representative of responses of students with various "special needs" to working in heterogeneous or "mixed ability" student groupings in regular classrooms. These students are usually characterized by the same high need for peer group affiliation and acceptance found among their "more able" classmates. Thus, the interactive nature of small group work, when it is well structured by the teacher, makes this a potentially effective approach to stimulating interest and effort among students with specific learning or behavioural difficulties who often become despondent about their capacity to experience success in school (Braddock & Slavin, 1993; Reschly, 1988). Engaging in meaningful work with a mixed group of their peers contributes to these students' sense of belonging, self efficacy, communication skills, and capacity for satisfying, harmonious peer relationships. In fact, many studies of the effects of heterogeneous or "mixed ability" student groups have demonstrated a range of academic and socio-emotional benefits for students with mild to moderate "special needs", including specific learning disabilities, sensory handicaps, low self-esteem, underachievement and behavioural problems.

Observations of instructional practices in Singapore show clearly that teachers are eager to exploit the demonstrated advantages of having students work in small groups. This paper suggests that the contribution of group work to achieving high quality education in Singapore could be further enhanced by extending full participation in mixed ability groups to students with special needs.

## **The Problem**

In Singapore, most students with special needs have not suffered the deprivations that often accompany the practice in some other countries of segregating students with special needs into extensive remedial "pull-out" programmes, special classes, or exclusive schools. Yet, a degree of segregation persists through the common practice among teachers of arranging students within their classes into groups of relatively homogeneous students. Lower ability students and students with specific learning disabilities are often grouped together and segregated from their "more able" peers. Occasionally, students who are particularly disruptive or widely rejected by classmates are required to do their work alone, perhaps while seated next to the teacher's desk. Teachers often justify this kind of segregation or isolation of students with special needs on the basis that they "can't keep up with the others", "are not liked by the others", or "don't know how to behave properly in a group."

While homogeneous grouping undoubtedly has a place in helping to address differences in learning characteristics among students, a practice of invariably grouping students tends to exacerbate the social, psychological, and academic isolation that these students already often experience (Braddock et al., 1993).

Alternatively, when students with special needs are integrated into "mixed ability" groups, they are rarely assigned the role of group leader or any other clearly delineated role or function within the group. The practice of passing over students with special needs when assigning roles and tasks in groups contributes to their psychosocial problems, including negative self-attributions, apathy, stigmatization, and socio-emotional deficiencies (Bruininks, 1978; Reschly, 1988). Because of their learning or behavioural difficulties,

they often become the butt of derogatory comments by classmates, and it is not uncommon to find that their attempts to contribute to a group task are rebuked because other group members fear that their work will be "dragged down" by these weaker students. Further, their exclusion from meaningful roles during group activities increases the likelihood of their exclusion from informal social activities and friendship groups outside of school. The widespread perception and treatment of these students by their peers as "backwards", "slow", "useless," and generally undesirable often results in disciplinary problems as well.

This paper offers suggestions for fully integrating students with special needs into the life of a regular classroom through a combination of well structured, cooperative group work, social skills training, and clearly delineated roles for all group members. These steps are suggested on the assumption that, when practiced patiently and persistently throughout the school year, they can help to overcome the difficulties frequently experienced when students with special needs are involved in group work, and can have beneficial effects on the functioning of the class as a whole (Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman & Sheldon, 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

### **Why Heterogeneous Student Groupings?**

On the basis of a review of research on effects of heterogeneous cooperative learning groups on personal and social dimensions, Slavin (1983a, p. 362) concludes: "The overall effects of meaningful participation in small group work on student cooperation, mutual concern, race relations and relations with mainstreamed students, liking of school, self-esteem, and internal locus of control are positive and robust."

**Motivation.** Research indicates that students who have become apathetic because of learning difficulties will do better when given more opportunities to direct and monitor their own learning and to learn from their peers (Reschly, 1988; Schumaker, Deshler & Ellis, 1986). McDaniel (1984, p. 47) notes that: "When students learn the joy of working productively together toward common goals, motivation inevitably improves." Ames and Felker (1979) report that

cooperative goal structures involving mixed ability groups can provide students who have "failure" identities with the kind of feedback they need to realize that increased effort can lead to success.

**Achievement.** Academically, when high, medium, and low achieving students are grouped together, depth of understanding, reasoning, and long-term retention are increased through more frequent giving and receiving of explanations among group members, more elaborative thinking, and greater perspective in discussing materials and tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1984; Slavin, 1983; Sutton, 1992). Also, students who are low in task-orientation tend to stay more focused on their work when they are placed in a group with task-oriented peers (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

**Self-esteem.** In cooperative groups, the effort of the whole group makes it possible for each member to experience success. This experience produces and maintains positive self-esteem (Covington, 1984; Covington & Omelich, 1986). Also, the sense of belonging offered by participation in a group and working productively toward common goals promotes higher levels of self-esteem and motivation to learn (McDaniel, 1984).

**Interpersonal relationships.** Heterogeneous student groupings can help to overcome the initial prejudices and negative attitudes that students often have towards students who are differently abled or more needy. In a synthesis of research on cooperative learning strategies, Joyce, Showers, and Rolheiser-Bennett (1987) concluded that cooperative learning groups involving students with varied learning abilities and needs working together can significantly increase students' demonstrations of empathy and positive regard for others, while reducing intergroup tensions and antisocial behaviour.

**Adjustment.** Students with special needs are typically more immature socially and emotionally than their age-mates (Dupont, 1978), and are at risk for developing social and emotional problems, including loneliness, depression, early school leaving, gang involvement, and drug abuse. In order to prevent the development of secondary psychosocial adjustment problems among students with

special needs, classroom activities must be structured to facilitate relations of respect and friendship between these "at risk" students and students with positive learning histories, behaviour, and personal adjustment. These relationships will exert a normative socialization pressure upon students who tend toward disruptive or socially deviant behaviours.

**Life skills.** Groups are an effective vehicle for learning about how groups work, experiencing the range of differences among people, and for developing constructive group behaviours which will serve students well in later years.

### Basic Assmptions

The use of heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups is predicated on a few basic assumptions about the teacher's role.

- (1) The teacher is responsible for providing optimal conditions for the development of students' all round development, including the consolidation of a positive self-concept, the development of interpersonal skills, and the enhancement of general socio-emotional adjustment. This assumption is embraced by the pastoral care approach that has been adopted by Singapore schools.
- (2) The teacher is responsible not only for providing optimal opportunities for students to **learn content and skills**, but for helping students to **learn how to learn**. While this goal is usually considered with reference to meta-cognitive skills, it should be extended to helping students learn how to participate effectively in task-focused groups and how to benefit academically and psychosocially from this learning activity.
- (3) Although homogeneous grouping and individual work have a place in school, students with special needs should not invariably be isolated from meaningful involvement with their "more able" classmates. Heterogeneous student groupings, used at least some of the time, can benefit all students (Hazel et al., 1982).

## Setting Up Heterogeneous Learning Groups

**Group Size.** A small group could be as few as two students, or as many as five or six students, sharing a common purpose. In classrooms where either the teacher or the students are not experienced or skilled in small group work, it is best to start with pairwork or groups of three students. Students become able to work effectively in larger groups as they and their teacher become more experienced. Also, groups need not all be the same size. Some students may be intimidated or overstimulated by groups involving more than one or two other students, while others can work well in larger configurations.

**Assigning students to groups.** In general, an optimal combination of students can be achieved when the teacher assigns students to groups. Student-selected groups are often homogeneous and reflect pre-existing friendship circles and prejudices. One way to assign students to groups is to select one or two students at each level of high, average, and low ability. Alternatively, a heterogeneous group can be selected to form a skillful and supportive group around a particular student with special needs.

**Group duration.** Groups should stay together as long as they need to in order to experience success. In general, groups that are not functioning well should be maintained and helped to learn the social skills or behavioural roles they need to resolve their difficulties.

**Rotating group membership.** Each student should have an opportunity to work with every other student in his or her class during the school year. This creates a strong positive feeling of cooperation and belonging within the class as a whole. Rotating membership also gives students with special needs opportunities to develop and practice skills with a wide variety of people, and to benefit from the support and help of other students without over-burdening any one group.

## Structuring Productive Interaction in Heterogeneous Groups

Teachers frequently report that students with special needs tend to be bored, withdrawn, or disruptive when placed in groups with their more able peers. The effectiveness of group work involving students with special needs can be greatly enhanced when the teacher provides a well-conceived, well-communicated, well-practiced, cooperative structure.

- (1) **Planning ahead.** The teacher must plan exactly what students are expected to do at every step of the group experience. The extent to which students benefit from group work depends in part upon the teacher's skill in applying all the principles of effective teaching when planning lessons, including for example: providing students with a motivating rationale or lesson induction; selecting meaningful topics; choosing tasks of appropriate levels of challenge; ensuring continuity with other areas of instruction; providing adequate time and resources, and so on.
- (2) **Communicating expectations clearly.** Before students begin their groupwork, the teacher must communicate clearly exactly what is expected. When involving students with special needs in group work, it is not enough to say, as teachers often do: "I want you to work in your groups on this activity. You have to take turns and cooperate so that you can get your work done." Clear communication may be accomplished through:
  - repetition
  - reinforcement of directions through the teacher modelling the desired behaviours or group work product
  - calling on students to repeat or summarize the directions
  - asking students to role play the desired behaviours
  - leaving the instructions projected on an overhead transparency



- giving each group the instructions on a piece of paper.

(3) **Teaching social skills.** While motivation to affiliate with others appears to be innate, social skills must be learned. Students with special needs are often more deficient in social skills than other classmates (Bruininks, 1978; Deshler & Schumaker, 1983; Dupont, 1978; Gresham, 1981; Reschly, 1988). In order to enable these students to interact satisfactorily in their groups, they must be taught social, or "collaborative" skills (Brandt, 1987; Johnson & Johnson, 1990). For example, teachers need to help students to learn basic communication skills, including when to talk, how long to talk, how loudly to talk, and so forth. If students are asked to encourage each other to contribute, time needs to be allocated for exploring students' understanding of what an "encouragement" is, and for helping students to build up their repertoire of encouraging statements or gestures.

Excellent resources for learning about the teaching of social skills in the classroom include an edited volume by Cartledge and Milburn (1986) and a series of training videotapes and materials by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1990).

Teaching students how to be effective participants in small group work, takes time. However, social skill lessons can replace the time that many teachers spend disciplining students for non-productive behaviours or calming the chaos created when students' behaviours in groups become unmanageable.

(4) **Allowing students to practice groupwork skills.** The teacher must allow time for students to review and practice the interaction skills and role behaviours that are expected.

- (5) **Providing a clearly defined group goal.** The group task must be structured so that group members perceive that their goals can only be reached if everyone in their group reaches their own learning goals (Slavin, 1983b). Following a review of research, Slavin (1987, p. 9) concludes: "Simply putting students into mixed ability groups and encouraging them to work together are not enough to produce learning gains: students must have a reason to take one another's achievement seriously, to provide one another with the elaborate explanations that are critical to the achievement effects of cooperative learning."
- (6) **Making students individually accountable.** Activities must be structured so that each member contributes significantly to the group effort. One approach is to ask students to record and evaluate their contributions to the group process and product. Another approach is to have groups study and practice a task and then move to individual work designed to assess each student's mastery (e.g., quizzes or worksheets on the material studied by the group). Individual marks may be computed with reference to improvement criteria. Group marks may be computed on the basis of each member's improvement (Slavin, 1983c).
- (7) **Assigning a meaningful role to each group member.** In order to ensure that all students interact meaningfully when working in groups, the teacher should assign clear, interdependent roles to all group members. Examples of roles include: communicator, presenter, recorder, runner, manager, encourager, and observer.

Decisions about what roles to assign should be based on:

- (a) the size of the group - one role for each member
- (b) the nature of the task requirements
- (c) the amount of time available to teach different roles
- (d) the developmental level of the students
- (e) the social learning needs of the students

Group roles should be rotated among group members so that all students can experience all the roles, and so that the possibility for conflict among group members about who will do what is reduced.

Jaques (1984) offers one of the more detailed, pragmatic, and comprehensive guides on the aims and processes of small groups for teaching and on procedures and techniques which might be used to improve the teacher's skills in using this approach.

## **Conclusion**

Effective teachers employ a multimethod approach that is responsive to the assessed needs of individual students and the class as a whole. Teachers must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of alternative classroom activities, drawing upon their experience, perceptiveness about specific learner characteristics, particular instructional goals, and intuition in order to determine when and precisely how to use heterogeneous groups involving students with special needs.

Heterogeneous student groupings increase the accommodative capacity of regular classrooms to respond to individual differences in learning abilities and psychosocial development among students. Involving students with special needs in "mixed ability" groups can contribute to their motivation, meaningful involvement in the life of the classroom, learning outcomes, and personal growth. Indeed, the experience of all students can be enhanced through carefully structured groupwork, along with guided practice in requisite social skills and role behaviours.

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