Employing Group Method as a Way of Teaching: A Continuation of What Obtains in Society

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Abstract

The thesis of this paper argues that group work is the most natural method of teaching. This argument is born out of the fact that human beings naturally want to be in groups and most of their activities are carried out in groups. When people are in groups, they share a diversity of opinions and this enriches experiences. It is argued that in order for group work to be effective, the method should be properly used. The effectiveness depends on a deep reflection by a practitioner before one assigns his/her class any form of group activity. The teacher’s role during group work is as important as the quality of tasks given to pupils. The class should not be left to navigate on their own without the assistance of the teacher. The success of the activities depends on how the teacher manages his/her work, from the time he/she prepares the activities right to the end when pupils present their findings. The paper does not argue that group work is the only effective way of teaching but argues that due consideration should be accorded to it in teaching, since it is effective when applied properly and relates very well to life outside the school.

Introduction

Group work is not a new concept that came with formal education as most people might be tempted to think. Group work is as old as humanity itself. Human beings by nature are gregarious. Before the dawning of the so called ‘civilisation era’, people have always cherished the idea of moving, living and working in groups.

Common sense dictates that if a heavy burden is carried by many people, it becomes lighter and manageable than if carried by an individual. This is one of the reasons why people work in groups. People have learnt to share their sorrows, frustrations, desires, ambitions and successes with other members since time immemorial. No matter how gifted one might be, one cannot be talented in every aspect of human life and therefore people need others’ assistance in one way or another in order to survive. The power of a group in any activity cannot be underrated.

The Shona people have proverbs which prove the importance of group work. Some of the proverbs are as follows,

1. Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda. (One big finger cannot crush a louse).
2. Rume rimwe harikombi churu. (One man cannot surround an anthill).
3. *Zanondega akaonekwa nembonje pahuma.* (Mr know-it-all ended in trouble).

However, there are some critics who argue that, the Shona people also discourage group work through their proverbs like, *Mbeva zhinji hadzina marise* (Too many cooks spoil the broth). This might seem a convincing argument, but when interrogated further, it is apparent that the idea behind such a proverb was never intended to discourage group work. What it discouraged were large groups and not the concept of group work per se. The underlying meaning of the proverb is that groups must be of a manageable size (small) in order for group work to be executed effectively. This idea of small groups will be discussed later in this paper.

We, therefore, cannot escape from the fact that human beings by nature place themselves into groups. If they are given the slightest opportunity, they voluntarily group themselves into small groups with self appointed leaders. If one can notice what happens soon after a church service or even when a teacher leaves a class for some minutes, one thing that normally happens is that people form groups.

At a macrocosm level, we have two broad groups, namely, the males and females. In life there are certain activities and associations which are either exclusively male or female. In traditional Shona society, one finds boys and girls separated from each other and the rest of the society for a certain period of time in order for them to be educated about their future roles in society. Through these sexual groupings, people share experiences of life which they later share with other members of the society. Through such sharing of experience, people understand each other better.

In the traditional home, family members eat in different groups according to ages or sexes or both. Sometimes girls eat separately from boys. The eating arrangement can be as follows, (1) boys, (2) girls (3) father and mother or (1) young boys and girls, (2) older boys, (3) older girls, (4) father, (5) mother. These groups vary from family to family but what is important is that people eat in separate groups, according to certain criterion. The criterion is what is important in any group formation. Within different sexual groups as earlier on noted, people learn through sharing different experiences. Whenever members of the traditional groups met problems, they did consult their seniors namely *vatete* (aunts), *vana mbuya* (grandmothers), *vana sekuru* (grandfathers/uncles) and *vana babamunini* (uncles). All such seniors had knowledge and experience to educate other members of the society.

Finally it should be noted that society, from the micro-unit (family) to the whole world, is arranged into groups as diagrammatically represented below. The diagram is to be read from bottom to top.
Within these groups there are people who work as individuals as well as group members depending on circumstances. The modern school cannot fail to see the advantages of organising pupils into groups to facilitate effective learning. If it fails to recognise the fundamentality of group work, it would be violating the natural order of human life. The modern school is organised into separate groups. This is done in order for the school authorities to effect proper management. At a boarding school, for example, boys stay in dormitories separate from girls, teachers on the other hand normally stay separately from both girls and boys dormitories. The pupils themselves are divided into large groups called forms, sometimes
further split into different streams. When teachers and pupils assemble in the school hall, they again normally sit in groups – teachers sit separately from pupils and boys usually sit separately from girls.

After having observed that, in society, people generally work in groups, it is now pertinent to discuss the rationale behind group work in a classroom situation.

Rationale For Group Work

Having observed that human beings are naturally group structured, it would not obviously be correct to assume that these groups survive for no apparent reason. If we violate certain aspects of group work in education, we will stifle the intellectual, cognitive development among the pupils. Pupils, like any other human beings in everyday life, should be afforded an opportunity to share their experiences in groups, challenge certain assumptions, critique social realities and come up with their positions as they perceive the body of knowledge before them.

The observation of Harvey (ed) (1974:28) cannot be far from correct. He notes the following about group work:

> Given that we learn so many vital things about ourselves in groups, it seems a natural step to educate our students in manageable comfortable groups, with which they can easily identify and in which they can acquire new and exciting insights about themselves and the world they live in.

The same author points out that group work is by no means the only worthwhile method of teaching, “but without it a central educational experience is lost, to both teachers and the taught” (ibid 1978:28). This makes group work very important in the teaching and learning process.

Importance Of Group Work

The group work method helps pupils to understand that knowledge is not teacher-owned but that it exists independent of the teacher. The role of the teacher in group work is that of guiding learning activities and the teacher must also learn from the pupils. In group work, there must be an environment which promotes democratic trading of ideas. There must be a friendly environment where each child must be free to express his/her views. Pupils, apart from sharing information, are helped to develop better personal relationships.

During the discussion process, individuals learn to articulate their points of view to members of the same age. They are free to take their positions, especially those who might be too shy to air their views to the rest of the class. There is room for pooling of a knowledge base from where individuals profit from one another’s experience. Dreikurs, et al (1971:101) note:
In group discussion we have a class of children working on the same problem at the same time, and results are usually good. Quite often the children will realise there are a number of solutions to the same problem.

Through group work, pupils learn from one another as well as learn to accept others as leaders. Through group work, tolerance is encouraged among pupils as they learn to respect one another’s views. Such views can be totally different from their own. Pupils also learn to sit close to members of the opposite sex and share different experiences. Sharing seats close to members of the opposite sex helps pupils to adjust to members of a different sex. Group work also helps pupils to develop evaluative skills as they engage in evaluating each other’s contributions. Through group work, pupils also learn to:

- co-operate in solving problems;
- test their ideas;
- be self confident;
- associate with others.

Finally, through group work, pupils learn how to constructively handle frustrations as they grapple with problems before them. Apart from educational benefits, long time friendships can be born out of group work.

Organising Group Work

Contrary to common views of some inexperienced teachers that group work affords a teacher an opportunity to rest, group work is quite demanding if done in an educationally meaningful way. Group work requires thorough preparation before the class is given tasks. Every group work should have a well defined purpose. The purpose should be clear to both the teacher and the pupils. The teacher should be clear on the following questions:

1. Why giving group work?
2. Why on this particular stage of the topic?
3. Why to this particular class?
4. Why on this aspect?
5. Is it the best method to use for the aspect chosen?
6. Have I made the necessary materials to carry out group work effectively?
7. Do I have sufficient time to cover all aspects I want covered?
8. Will my pupils be ready for group work? (A class can be delayed (e.g.) from a practical subject). If the teacher has fully reflected on the above questions and is quite clear about all of them, he/she can confidently give group work to his/her pupils.

The teacher should prepare work cards before hand if necessary. The work cards should be written neatly and correctly. The work cards reflect the teacher’s attitude towards his/her
work. Pupils are smart to pick on what sort of attitude the teacher has towards his/her work. Pupils can see whether the teacher did or did not invest enough effort on group work. Either way, this will influence students either positively if work cards are prepared properly or negatively if they are not done properly.

Pupils should be given different tasks, sometimes according to their abilities and at times different but of equal demand, depending on the characteristics of the group members. Some group members may be slow learners who need to be given fewer and easier tasks. This will help such group members to finish their task in time with others, thus, encouraging the less gifted members. When a teacher has finished giving group instructions, group members should quickly go into their respective groups with minimal noise as a rule. Pupils should be encouraged to lift their chairs/desks, and not to slide them as though they have wheels.

The teacher’s ability to control his class is inevitably called for if group work has to be effective. The teacher should have a ‘third eye’ and a ‘third ear’ in order for group work to be carried out effectively. Soon after the teacher has given some group work to his/her class and having defined the purpose for the group work, the teacher should situate himself/herself in the middle of the class. He/she should be strategically positioned to see any mischievous pupil. At this point, the teacher should not necessarily call individuals by name as a way of silencing those who make noise or disturb others. The teacher should, instead, give the noisy pupil a firm look.

The calling of pupils by names can have negative effects, both of publicly labelling a pupil as mischievous as well as disturbing others. The system of not calling names of noisy pupils during group work is an effective and non-disruptive way of signalling the teacher’s disapproval of the pupil’s behaviour. Some can argue that this is not effective because the pupil might not be looking at the teacher and thus continue to misbehave. True, such a situation can arise, but normally pupils are very sensitive when they do something wrong, or when they perceive to be doing something wrong. They promptly check whether the teacher has noticed them. If the pupil discovers that the teacher is not alert, he/she continues with her/his deviant behaviour. In some rare cases, where the errant pupil is not checking whether the teacher is noticing the errant pupil, normally other group members check the teacher’s response and advise him/her accordingly.

After the groups have settled, the teacher should now move around the groups. This movement is important in order for the teacher to see that all group members participate and to assist members where they need assistance. Assistance should not translate into doing the work for the group. The teacher is not supposed to provide answers but instead to probe his/her pupils into further thinking. His/her movements from group to group should not be routinely the same. He/she should move from group to group in an unpredictable way.

Such unpredictable movements are meant to ‘ambush’ the groups so that the groups are left with no chances of pretending to be busy, especially, when the teacher approaches them. However, it should be noted that such movements must be done in a non-disruptive manner or
in a manner that attracts ‘entertainment mood’ in the class. In fact such teacher movements should not induce laughter among the pupils. These should be businesslike movements which bring about businesslike atmosphere in the classroom.

Teacher’s movements also help the teacher to check the progress of his/her groups. The teacher will notice the group which lags behind and that which is ahead of time. If necessary, the teacher could give faster groups another task to do, so that such groups are not kept idle. By moving from group to group, the teacher would also have the general assessment of the work given and time spent on each task. This would help the teacher in future when he/she gives his/her class group work.

When the teacher stops his/her groups, he/she should ensure that all the pupils go back to their usual positions promptly and with minimum noise. The orderly transition from group work to class work cannot be perfectly achieved in the first two or so weeks of starting group work if such a class was not used to working in groups. The exercise improves with practice. During the writer’s long stint as a teacher educator, the writer has observed many student teachers failing to disengage their groups. Feedback is done while pupils are still in their group positions. This practice creates an unhealthy learning environment as other pupils continue with their group work while others are reporting back. Some pupils remain seated, giving the teacher their backs, while the teacher demonstrates the findings to the class, on the board. In the process, one finds that most of the effort of group work is lost because of the teacher’s poor organisation.

Disengagement of groups helps pupils to refocus their attention to a new development in the classroom. Attention is now directed to the teacher and presenters and not to group members. All group members become members of a larger group and engage in evaluating, criticising, applauding and consolidating others’ findings. This is an important stage in group work since pupils now share a wider range of experience than in their groups.

The teacher’s role is not to provide answers but to provide mechanisms for the pupils to search for answers. Where a group presents information that is incorrect, the teacher should probe the group further as well as the class to come up with a refined answer. Where there are many dimensions to the question, the teacher must engage pupils into critical thinking so that they give other dimensions. If such dimensions are not forthcoming, it might be necessary to ask pupils to go and research about other dimensions and report back to the class on another day.

It should be emphasised that the teacher should remember to give pupils time to report their findings back to the class. The class can sometimes remind the teacher if it happens that he/she has forgotten to ask for a report back on work assigned to be carried out after school hours. However, it would not be a good habit to forget and to be always reminded of the task by the class. When one has been reminded, one should be courteous and honest enough to admit to the class that he/she is sorry to have forgotten such an important exercise. Some teachers profess to be infallible and would not want to admit their mistakes. However, it should be borne in mind that pupils respect teachers who admit their shortcomings. But to remain a
person of integrity, a teacher should avoid repeating such mistakes too often. If done repeatedly, this brings the teacher into disrepute with his/her class. Repeated shortcomings in one’s profession can amount to incompetence. Teachers should take group work seriously. Kaye. and Rogers. 1968:60 write:

When children have invested their emotions as well as their energies in a piece of work, the teacher should recognise this by treating its presentation as something of an occasion.

Arrangement Of Pupils Into Groups

Groups should be reasonably apart so as not to disturb each other. The teacher should freely move around the class to access all groups. Porous groups should not be allowed as a rule. What is understood to be porous groups here is the groups where pupils move from one group to another during group work. Group members should remain in their groups without interrupting other groups. If free movements are tolerated, group work is likely to be disrupted. The group atmosphere that should prevail is that of a rigid boundary as shown in Fig. (i) and not that which we find in Fig (ii)
In diagram (i) we have a non-porous class as well as the groups. Group work is done in a serious manner with minimum or no disturbance at all. In contrast, diagram (ii) shows a class and groups which are very porous. Such group work is usually characterised by lack of supervision of group work by the teacher responsible. Pupils move in and out of the classroom and members of different groups hop from one group to another. This movement is usually done by pupils who trade ideas which have nothing to do with group work.

**Forming Groups**

Pupils are placed into different groups depending on the purpose the teacher wants the groups to achieve. There are certain criteria which teachers use to place pupils into groups. Marland, (1975:66) recognises three strategies used in grouping pupils, namely, pupils of mixed ability groups, group chosen for specific quality and a friendship group. However, there are other
strategies of grouping pupils such as interest grouping, mechanical grouping and achievement level group. Grouping depends on the teacher’s criteria and what he/she intends to achieve by such grouping. To a large extent the purpose of the groups will determine how one forms his/her groups.

**Dissenting Voices On Group Work**

Many critics have pointed out that group work has many disadvantages. It is often argued that group work has some of the following disadvantages:

- Gifted pupils are held back by the less gifted ones;
- During group work, it is usually an individual or a small number within the group who does the bulk of the work. Most of the members will be passive listeners and as a result gain very little in the process. They develop a passive-listener-syndrome;
- Individually acquired skills are the requirement of the today’s world but group work does not prepare pupils to work and study on their own. Group work, instead encourages co-operative thinking in solving a problem;
- Group work is normally characterised by noise;
- Group work is time consuming. The teacher and the class waste time in moving into and out of the groups. Time wasted by these movements could profitably be used in learning.

Most of the foresaid disadvantages, though they seem convincing, are unfortunately not. If group work is properly organised, most if not all, the advanced disadvantages fall away. Pupils make noise and waste time if the teacher is not properly organised, as a result one blames group work and not the teacher. This is unfortunate. It is like a bad carpenter who blames his tools. On the argument that weak pupils benefit from a few intelligent pupils, this is aptly answered by Blount and Klausmeier, (1968:273). They say:

> Whether the better students should help the slower cannot be answered dogmatically. However, civilised group life is based on the assumption that the strong will help the weak, that anarchy flourishes when group life is based on the survival of the fittest.

The above quotation is in agreement with what obtains in society. When people work in groups, there is bound to be some individuals who contribute more than others. People are gifted differently and pupils should know that the weaker members should be assisted for the better of the group.

**Conclusion**

This discussion concludes by saying that group work is not the only method which should be used in teaching but it is one such method which cannot be entirely done away with. People
the world over live in groups and do most of their life activities in groups. If we are agreed that education prepares pupils for life, it should therefore be seen to encourage group learning in schools. Learning becomes exciting when learners share knowledge and experiences. Soon they discover that they have more or less the same cognitive problems. It is unlike a situation where there are many lone individuals struggling on their own, “dwarfed” from each other and dwarfed by the problem. In a situation where individuals are left alone to solve their problems, the struggle becomes intense and frustrating, no one knows how his/her next colleague sails. All grapple in the dark with each individual thinking he/she is the only one who is useless, therefore the exercise becomes depressing.

However, in order for group work to succeed, the teacher should be well organised and his/her class should be businesslike during such sessions. Group work, like any other teaching method should be varied with other methods and not to engage groups in every session.

Bibliography


