Research Brief

Group Work

Questions: What does the research say about the value of group work?
How does a principal work with teachers to assure that group work and activities contributes to student learning?

In a Nutshell

According to Johnson and Johnson, group work helps increase student retention and satisfaction, develops strong oral communication and social skills, as well as higher self-esteem (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Group work, when planned and implemented deliberately and thoughtfully helps students develop cognitive and leadership skills as well as a sense of responsibility, all of which are required in the contemporary work place. Learning goes into one's long-term memory when it is challenging, meaningful, and relates to the real world. When students are asked to solve genuine problems, they own the problem and will work diligently to solve it. Group work provides these indispensable experiences for students.

Summary of Findings:

The role of public schools has been to provide an education to its citizenry so that they have the skills necessary to be proficient in the "real" world. As our society has gone from agricultural to industrial to information-based, the expectations of schools have changed. Schools are now preparing students for a world of work that is hardly imagined because knowledge is doubling every few months (Kagan, 2004). The needs of the business world determine the skills that are most valued. In the current market place, one more global and service oriented, those skills include being able to use higher order thinking skills, engage in critical thinking and problem solving, development of alternatives that might be described as "outside of the box," and interpersonal skills such as working well with and getting along with others (Kincaid, 2010; Sawchuck, 2009).

The current student population, known as Millennials, differs from previous generations. They are team-oriented, generally high achieving, pressured to succeed, incredibly comfortable with digital technology, multitaskers and accepting of racial and ethnic differences. It is critical that their learning is meaningful, useful and relevant. Successful instruction incorporates clear expectations, skill at time management and conflict resolution, utilization of cutting edge technology, and development of school and classroom patterns and rituals (California State University, Long Beach, 2008; Walker, 2006). One strategy that can be highly effective in assisting students to develop these essential skills is group/project work.

Group work

Learning goes into one's long-term memory when it is meaningful, relates to the real world and is challenging. When students try to solve a genuine problem, they own it and will work diligently to solve it. Group work can provide these indispensable experiences for students. According to Johnson and Johnson, group work helps increase student retention and satisfaction, develops

strong oral communication and social skills, as well as higher self-esteem (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Structure of Beneficial Group Work
Group work is most successful when it has the following attributes:
- the teacher possesses depth of content knowledge;
- the project is authentic and applies to real life in a meaningful way;
- the planning, procuring of materials, gaining access to appropriate people and determining how students will be assessed is completed prior to starting the project;
- teachers assign students to groups group (four to five is ideal) in a variety of ways, depending upon the purpose/goal of the work---based on interest, randomly, academic goals, or student choice;
- the teacher regularly meets with the groups to assess where they are in the project, make certain all members are participating and provide guidance as necessary
- the teacher is the facilitator, not "the show;"
- the students have developed skills in the following areas:
  - their responsibility as a group member
  - organization of tasks
  - time management
  - conflict resolution
  - how to actively listen
  - how to support their point of view
  - how to respond critically
  - how to accept the constructive criticism of others
  - negotiation ;

(Bright Hub, n.d.; Centre for the Study of Higher Education, n.d.; Education Portfolio, n.d.; Grazier, 2001; Kincaid, 2010; Pierce, 2010; Sawchuck, 2009).

Support of the Principal
The principal should:
- have strong knowledge about the group process, its structure and benefits;
- access resources to assure training and on-going staff development in this area;
- provide access to (as realistically as possible, given the available resources) the necessary materials, resources and technology;
- supply time for staff to work together to plan, implement and assess their students' group work;
- offer coverage of a teacher's class so he/she may observe group work in a colleague's class;
- be understanding and supportive, especially when it comes to teacher evaluations, about the process the teacher is learning so that the teacher feels safe to try new instructional strategies;
- offer opportunities for students to share their projects with stakeholders and community members;
- support opportunities for teachers and students, as appropriate, to present at conferences (Sawchuck, 2009)

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Resources

- Baarseghian, T. (n.d.). Design thinking: Creative ways to solve problems. Retrieved online from http://www.edutopia.org/classroom-design-k12-laboratory
The premise of thinking like a designer is different than thinking like an educator and this is what is explored in this article.

- Bright Hub. (n.d.). Classroom management techniques during group work. Retrieved online http://www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/19616.aspx
Guidelines for managing a classroom during group are provided in this piece.

- California State University, Long Beach. (2008). Meeting the needs of Millennial students. Retrieved online http://www.csulb.edu/divisions/students2/intouch/archives/2007-08/vol16_no1/01.htm
Although written about entering college students, it succinctly describes the Millennial generation and characteristics to keep in mind when educating them.

- Centre for the study of higher education. (n.d.). Assessing group work. Retrieved online http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html
The characteristics of and process for utilizing group work are laid out and described in this piece.

- Davis, B. G. (n.d.) Collaborative learning: Group work and study teams. Retrieved online http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html
This is a chapter from a book the author had written that lays out guidelines for working in groups.

- Education Portfolio. (n.d.). The value of group work. Retrieved online http://semportfolio.wikidot.com/s9agroupwork
A very brief description of the benefits of group work.

- Grazier, P. (2001). Team motivation. Retrieved online http://www.nclinc.org/SynergySum01/Synergy%20Fall%202001PS.pdf
This article examines the necessary components that make a strong team.

- Kagan, S. (2004). From lessons to structures-A paradigm shift for 21st century education. Retrieved online http://www.kaganonline.com/KaganClub/FreeArticles/ASK24.html
The author provides a brief history of the numerous instructional trends from the past and supports reasons that preparing students for the future, depends on utilizing structures or processes versus specific content knowledge.

- Kincaid, S. (2010). Learning 21st Century skills. Retrieved online http://www.bismarcktribune.com/news/local/article_243fa61c-fc7f-11de-8ddc-001cc4c03286.html
This article briefly describes different types of group projects as well as expectations the business world has for workers.

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- Paulson, D. R. & Faust, J. L. (n.d.) Active learning for the college classroom. Retrieved online http://www.calstatela.edu/dept/chem/chem2/Active/
This piece provides descriptions of numerous active learning strategies that can be used in high school and college classrooms.

- Pierce, D. (2010). Four things every student should learn…but not every school is teaching. Retrieved online http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/02/08/four-things-every-student-should-learn-but-not-every-school-is-teaching/
The importance of training students in the use and applications of the Internet, especially as it pertains to them in the real world, is described in this article.

- Sawchuck, S. (2009). '21st-Century skills focus shifts W. VA teachers' roles. Retrieved online from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/01/07/16skills_ep.h28.html?tkn=OXXCEYjPmNRFS8sc5YZqMAnxlwIGPwpdrbky
A description of project learning done in groups is provided in this piece.

- University of Minnesota. (n.d.). Cooperative learning center. Retrieved online http://www.co-operation.org/
This is the home site for the Cooperative Learning Center that Johnson & Johnson, cooperative-learning gurus, coordinate. There are a myriad of articles on research, structures, etc.

- Walker, K. (2006). Millennials and schools of the future. Retrieved online http://www.principalspartnership.com/millennials.pdf
This brief provides a description of the Millennial generation and what schools should be doing to meet their unique needs.

- West Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). Teach 21. Retrieved online http://wvde.state.wv.us/teach21/
This is the home site for this state where curriculum and assessment ideas are available.

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