CHAPTER 20 – Small groups in the collaborative classroom

Classroom Activity: Small groups and cooperative learning

Learning with a partner or a small group is very effective for encouraging children to read independently and to increase their fluency. Pair and group work is especially effective if a more experienced reader works with someone who is struggling. The more proficient reader learns to describe his or her reading strategies and this increases the other child's metalinguistic awareness of the possible reading strategies to use.

Chris Hastwell, an experienced teacher who uses cooperative learning, wrote about how she sets up small-group work at the beginning of the school year. She uses small-group work with children recently arrived from many different countries who are learning to speak English and has some tips for getting started.

Guidelines for using group work

Group work is valuable because children:

- support each other
- work at their own level
- work independently of the teacher
- experience a variety of tasks.

These groups can be:

- homogeneous—children working at or near the same level
- heterogeneous—children of different levels working together.

It is important that:

- there is a child or children who can be chosen as the leader—it does not always have to be the same person
- children who may exhibit disruptive behaviour are separated (this means not having two disruptive children in one group)
- the teacher can remove any children who disrupt the group.

Getting started

- Place the children in approximately five groups of six. Choose children who you think will work together well, and nominate a leader.
- Write up the groups and give each group a number from 1 to 6. Put a star by the leader's name.
- Explain to the class that they will be working in small groups for some of the lesson, and that there are some rules to be followed to help the group work well.

Modelling behaviour

- Choose a book for each group.
- For the first session, choose a group to demonstrate the small-group procedure.
- Ask the rest of the class to quietly stand around the circle and watch the group working. When the demonstration is finished, discuss the steps with the children.

Reading activity rules

1. Our leader helps the group.
2. I read quietly to myself.
3. I read my book to my partner.
4. I listen to my partner read.
5. We read the book together.
6. The leader reads the activity with us.
7. We complete the activity quietly.
8. The leader chooses one person to share their activity or read at the end of the session in sharing time.
9. We sit quietly, listening to children sharing their activity.
10. The leaders quickly report to the class about how their group was working.

Establishing routines

- Follow the rules from numbers 1 to 5 for the first two or three lessons. Just practise the reading until the children start to function as a cooperative group. When they achieve this, continue on with steps 6, 7 and 8. Eventually, all the rules will be well established and followed by each group.
- When all groups are working, move around the groups, helping and assessing how they are working together.
- When you start to do the reading activities, you will need to explain the activity to each group. As you progress, the children will become more familiar with the different tasks.

Some of the best cooperative learning strategies

Quick whip-around

A group sits in a circle and each person offers feedback on their own individual contribution. Variations include individuals commenting on their peers' efforts, for example, the person on their left. It is important that each group member receives feedback. A quick whip-around can also be used when children sit in a circle and each participant is asked to reflect on and predict the content of a big book or picture book based on the cover.

Numbered heads

Each person in a group is allocated or gives themselves a number. The teacher or observer can pose a question and, for example, all the number 4s give a response.

Think/pair/share

Use think/pair/share after a group has listened to you read aloud. The children reflect for a minute or two on a question posed by you or by a group member. These reflections can be written down. The ideas are then shared with a partner. You could ask individuals to paraphrase the ideas given by their partner.

Think/pair/share can be used to gather children's responses or to gather questions readers may pose before reading the next chapter or section. Reactions to writing, and feedback to authors about their writing can be gathered in a quick, brief think/pair/share structure. All children contribute rather than one or two more articulate children.

Think/pair/four/share

Each pair joins up with another pair and all take turns retelling by paraphrasing their partner's ideas and responses. The group of four then attempts to reach consensus by combining or synthesising ideas. A summariser may then provide a summary or consensus of ideas for the class.

Red light—green light thinking

Children discuss an issue in pairs, such as 'Screens should be banned'. One person nominates to take the green-light view and the other the red-light view.

- The green-light view symbolises growth, creativity, energy and divergent thinking. The green-light person brainstorms, looks at alternatives and seeks new ideas.
- The red-light view symbolises stop lights, danger, caution, reflection, convergent thinking and examines the consequences of various ideas and actions.

This structure works best if time is set aside first for the green-light view. Once the green-light brainstorm is exhausted, the red-light person steps in to examine the consequences of the green-light suggestions.

Six hats

The six thinking hats structure is used in many classrooms to generate divergent thinking and perspective-taking about a text. The cooperative structure offers great possibilities for discussing both information and narrative texts. For example, the question of whether it is possible to find a replacement for logging trees from rainforests was discussed after reading the picture book *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Jeannie Baker).

Children in randomly selected groups of six were assigned a coloured hat (either concretely or symbolically). The hats were exchanged several times during the discussion. Sometimes children wear the same hat for the whole discussion.

WHITE HAT: Information, facts only, not interpretations or arguments

RED HAT: Emotions, how people may feel or how the red-hat person personally feels, uses intuition

PURPLE HAT: Caution, judgement, looks at the consequences of any idea or action, is critical and plays devil's advocate

YELLOW HAT: Positive, optimistic view, looks at the benefits of the idea

GREEN HAT: Creative, divergent ideas, brainstorms, offers something that has not been said before

BLUE HAT: Encourages others, monitors the process, makes sure each person has a turn, summarises what has been said, decides if people should change hats

(adapted from de Bono 2000)

EEKK

An acronym for sitting *eye to eye* and *knee to knee*, EEKK structure promotes face-to-face interaction. The roles of listener/speaker, interviewer/interviewee or affirmative/negative are assigned, and children can be introduced to simple debating skills.

For example, after children in groups of six had read a short story, they chose to debate the question, 'Was it right for the children to cook alone in the kitchen?' (The issue has to have two points of view.) The group of six split into pairs. One person in each pair took an affirmative role and worked out three arguments for 'yes'. The other took a negative role and presented three arguments for 'no'.

Affirmative and negative roles were switched so both had a turn at exploring an issue from two sides. Then the pair tried to reach a compromise or consensus. The consensus was shared by each pair back in the group of six.

Huddle

Like a football huddle, groups join together to answer questions put by the teacher. You could ask the group to predict what the book will be about, to predict what will happen when the page is turned or to suggest how the plot might be resolved. Speed is a factor here and all group members contribute. Interactive huddles may pose a question to ask other groups across the classroom or, as a variation, each group could huddle to generate questions for the teacher.

Piggybacking

One of the most difficult things for children to do is to acknowledge the ideas of others. One way to do this is for children to learn to paraphrase the comments of a speaker they agree with and piggyback on the idea. The child might say, *'I agree [or disagree] that …'* then add their own comments. Piggybacking is something we all do. We all piggyback on each other's ideas and depend on others for feedback on our ideas and for ways of refining and improving our teaching.

Round table

In small groups, children share one piece of paper and a marker to record several ideas or answers. Call on groups to predict what will happen to the character in a picture book. The group huddles and shares responses. Several responses or one group summary may be recorded. Another version of this is to have one piece of paper and several pens and children write one idea on the piece of paper and pass it to the next person. Children can be in teams, recording all the prior knowledge they have about a topic before beginning research or further reading.

Literature think/pair/share

After reading a book, the whole class forms pairs. The children are given time to think of words to describe the feelings of one of the characters; for example, *exasperated, annoyed, rushed, furious*. Pairs take turns to share their ideas. You may have to help the children build up images of what the character may be experiencing.

Three-step interview

Pose a problem or a question about a book the class is reading, such as *Hurry Up, Oscar!* (Sally Morgan). Oscar is always late for school and his mum continually asks if he is ready. In pairs, the children assign themselves the roles of person A and person B. Person B interviews person A, who is role-playing Oscar's mum. '*What is happening in your house?*' person B asks Oscar's mum. Person A responds, then asks Oscar (person B) what is happening. They take turns to interview each other. Pairs form a group of four and paraphrase their partner's perspective for other members in the group.

Partner reading

Partners assign themselves the roles of person A or person B. The pairs negotiate how much they will read before discussing the text. Person A reads a page or several pages of a novel. Then the text is covered and person B summarises what has been read. Person A checks for key ideas left out. Both then create a word or a picture (metaphor or analogy) to help remember the information. Person B then reads the next paragraph and puts the text out of sight while person A summarises, and so on.

Collaborative reading script

The collaborative reading script is for partners to work together to understand texts. It works with nonfiction or fiction.

1. Flip a coin to see who will be partner A and partner B.
2. Both partners read passage 1.
3. When both are finished, put the passage out of sight.
4. Partner A orally summarises the contents of passage 1.
5. Partner B detects and corrects any errors in partner A's summary (metacognitive step).
6. Both partners work together to develop images, metaphors, and so on, to help make the summarised information memorable.
7. Both partners read passage 2.

Repeat steps 4 to 6 with partners reversing roles.