Student perspectives on groupwork: Findings of a school improvement initiative

Paul Rees[1]

Abstract: *The educational system has a crucial role in developing groupwork skills in children and young people which will, in time, assist in the broader use of groupwork within society. Many educational establishments have for some years routinely employed groupwork pedagogy yet there has been limited research on how students actually perceive groupwork. This paper reports on student attitudes toward groupwork (n=248) within the context of a school improvement initiative. Staff from three schools met to reflect on their own practice of classroom groupwork. A questionnaire was subsequently developed and administered to elicit the general attitude of the students towards groupwork as well as their views on competition, interdependence, accountability, learning outcomes, group composition, teacher involvement, citizenship, and learning styles. Overwhelming support for groupwork was found within the cohort. Groupwork is viewed as enjoyable, preferable to individual work, a teaching strategy that can be engaged with, beneficial to learning, an aid to concentration during learning, helpful for memorising learning objectives and beneficial for life post-school. The paper discusses emerging themes and implications for the future.*

Key words: groupwork; student perspectives; group composition; school improvement; citizenship; interdependence

1. Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Social Care

Address for correspondence: Swansea University, Room 324, Vivian Tower, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, Wales. P.G.Rees@swansea.ac.uk

Introduction

The ability to cooperate with others within a group is seen by some as a fundamental prerequisite of effective citizenship and of high importance, therefore, to any inclusive society (see, for example, Silverlock, 2000). This is, no doubt, one of the reasons why both generic groupwork pedagogy (Blatchford et al., 2003) and specific therapeutic groupwork interventions (Oborne and Maidment, 2007), have become popular in many inclusive educational establishments.

Groupwork pedagogy in schools has been aided by experimental research which has succeeded in throwing light on many of the complex factors that influence groupwork. For example, teachers' autonomy support (Reeve et al., 2004), the importance of peer ability level (Terwel et al., 2002), peer relationships and children's use of oral language (Jones, 2002), students' speech (Mueller and Fleming, 2001) and gender balance (Jackson, 2002). In education more generally there has been a growing realisation that the perceptions of students can also add much to our understanding of teaching and learning. This has led to a large growth in interactive consultation based research with students in many specialised areas (Kershner and Pointon, 2000; Hobbs et al., 2000; Cooper, 1993; Davie, 1993). Yet there have been relatively few studies carried out into students' perceptions of groupwork (see for example Galton, 1987; Cantwell and Andrews, 2002).

Given that many students currently in the latter phases of the education system have experienced little other pedagogy than that grounded in groupwork the time seems right to seek an appraisal from the students themselves. This was an issue identified and of interest to a school improvement group (SIG) consisting of staff from three schools and local education authority (LEA) officers who, incidentally, constituted a group themselves. The SIG were following the 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) model of school improvement (for an in-depth account of the model and the processes involved see Hopkins et al., 1996; Ainscow and West, 2006).

The SIG met on several occasions, reviewed relevant literature on groupwork and discussed their current practice. Not surprisingly there was much common ground as all schools represented by the SIG follow the National Curriculum and have common aims; to enable young people to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible

citizens (Qualification and Curriculum Authority, 2009). Yet it was noted that the relative emphasis on what was being taught, whether it be new skills, skill progression, subject specific knowledge or citizenship differed considerably across the subject areas of the National Curriculum. Consequently, the type of tasks students were being required to undertake in different curriculum areas also differed. Baines et al. (2003), have identified this as an important issue and rightly stressed the need to take care in matching groupwork techniques and learning tasks. Despite the variety of tasks being given to students the SIG were of the view that the wealth of groupwork techniques already available, for example, 'snowballing', 'listening triads', 'jigsawing', 'envoying' and 'rainbow grouping' (see Department for Education and Skills, 2004) had enabled groupwork to be widely used in all curriculum areas for many years.

During discussion it was observed that staff felt they had a good understanding of the views of students in relation to many aspects of groupwork, but there were also areas of uncertainty and even disagreement. It was agreed that an attempt should be made to ascertain both the general attitude of students towards groupwork and their views on specific issues. Throughout this 'naming and framing' phase (see Mitchell and Sackney, 2000 cited in Harris, 2000b) and all other phases of this initiative, the author was acting as 'external agency' (Harris, 2000a; Harris, 2000b). An 'external agent' is one who formally contributes from outside of the organisation(s) in which the change or development is to take place. For many schools the local authority provides a major source of 'external agency'. Harris, 2000b argues that research has demonstrated the necessity of 'external agency' at all points in the improvement process and identifies a number of specific roles for the 'external agent', for example, acting as a critical friend and a facilitator. At times the 'external agency' may need to challenge, confront, question, reformulate, accept and reflect back. Likewise, 'external agency' is seen as pivotal in assisting schools to analyse data as well as to integrate and disseminate findings. Harris (2000b), suggests that by virtue of being 'external' the 'agent' can provide and maintain momentum for change.

Through this process seven key areas were finally agreed upon.

Students' general attitude towards groupwork

While groupwork is clearly a popular pedagogy with teachers the SIG

felt less assured of the strength of support for the approach amongst students.

Competition

While some members of the SIG were of the opinion that the majority of students dislike competition and that it can be detrimental to learning, others seemed keen to champion its virtues. The SIG recognised, however, that many of the views expressed were based upon assumptions rather than actual feedback from students.

Positive interdependence

Johnson et al. (1991a, b) stress the importance of 'positive interdependence' within a group. The SIG expressed limited confidence in their own ability as teachers to promote 'positive interdependence'. They felt factors outside of their control such as a student's appearance or personal hygiene often raised difficult and sometimes insurmountable barriers to positive interdependence. It was suggested that consultation with students would go some way to helpful corroboration or refutation of such views as well as identifying factors that foster positive interdependence.

Learning outcomes

Renewed emphasis in the United Kingdom (UK) on school inspections and the publication of each school's examination results has, no doubt, focused the attention of many schools on readily measurable learning outcomes. The corollary of this is that schools are eager to evaluate the efficacy of teaching methods they employ in relation to such measures. Disappointingly, few inspection reports in the UK ever include comment on students' perspectives of teaching techniques (see Ofsted, 2008 & Estyn, 2008). It was felt by the SIG that any acknowledgement of positive learning outcomes by students in addition to the benefits staff see in groupwork could be further vindication of its use.

Group composition and teacher involvement

Groupwork necessitates the identification of group participants and

realistically, at the very least, some oversight of the group by the teacher. The issue of who should select participants and how the selection should be made is, of course, a practical issue that teachers must face (Ciani et al., 2008). There was some feeling in the SIG that students feel more secure when the teacher is in control of participant selection while others felt that it was possible to empower the students to do this themselves. In determining whether delegation of this task is appropriate staff felt the students' perceptions could provide useful insight. Further, staff felt that some indication by students of appropriate frequency of teacher/group contact would assist in their shaping their own practice.

Citizenship

Clearly one of the motivating factors in using groupwork in teaching is the perceived benefit for society of school leavers who can collaborate well with others (Silverlock, 2000). In the UK schools are now required to assess, record and report on citizenship in their students (Ofsted, 2002). The SIG sought student perspectives on the efficacy of groupwork in developing citizenship skills.

Self perception and learning styles

One of the greatest reservations that teachers within the SIG had regarding the routine use of groupwork was the possibility of causing distress to children who are not 'naturally predisposed' to this approach. Much discussion ensued on how stressful, for example, children find 'individual accountability' (Johnson et al. (1991a, b) in relation to the success of the group. Again the discussion revealed differing teacher perceptions on the issue and led to its inclusion in the student consultation exercise.

Method

Participants

The study involved school improvement groups from one comprehensive school, two primary schools (feeders) and LEA officers. Of mutual

interest to all members of the SIG was the students' perception around the time of transition (primary to secondary). All participating students were in Years 6 and 7 (age range 10 years 9 months to 12 years 6 months).

Table 1
Constitution of Sample

	Number of students	Males		Females	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	%
Comprehensive (aged 11 to 12)	129	61	47	68	53
Primary School 1 (aged 10 to 11)	91	51	56	40	44
Primary School 2 (aged 10 to 11)	28	14	50	14	50
Total	248	126	51	122	49

Instrument

The SIG, having agreed upon key themes, commissioned a subgroup of 5 members (representatives from each school and the LEA) to draft a questionnaire. The draft questionnaire was considered by the whole SIG and revised on the basis of feedback. The content of all individual items was derived from the discussion of the SIG.
The questionnaire was piloted in both the secondary and primary phase. The piloting process enabled checks to be made on the vocabulary selected for use. A number of revisions were made to individual items based on the feedback received from staff and students.

The questionnaire consists of open-ended, dichotomised and likert rating scale items. (All the individual items are self evident within the 'Results' section of this paper). A copy of the questionnaire is also available from the author on request.

Procedure

Questionnaires were all administered within a period of two weeks to classes (mixed ability) by class teachers. Teachers used an agreed script and read each item in turn to the whole class. Students completed the questionnaire anonymously.

Results

General attitude towards groupwork

Table 2
Student preferences, individual-cooperative work (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you prefer to work:			
On your own	9	8	11
With 1 friend	38	33	43
In a group	45	48	42
Whole class	7	10	4

Table 3
Enjoyment of working in a group (base = whole sample; n=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you enjoy working in a group?			
Yes	98	98	98
No	2	2	2

Table 4
Sharing of ideas (base = whole sample; n=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you like sharing your ideas with others?			
Yes	81	77	86
No	19	23	14
Do you enjoy brainstorming?			
Yes	67	62	71
No	33	38	29

Over 90% of students indicated a preference for work with others over individual work (see Table 2.). The remaining 9% of students who opted for individual work are a subgroup of particular interest. Data presented in Table 3 suggest that most of these children were indeed only expressing

a preference as only 2 % actually indicate a dislike of groupwork.

Table 4 reveals that 81 % of students claim to enjoy sharing their ideas but that there is also some variation in the preference of individuals for different modes of sharing ideas such as brainstorming.

Competition

There is evidently a leaning towards competition within the cohort (Table 5). A high proportion actually reports enjoyment in competition between groups even though a lower percentage actually consider themselves to be competitive in school. The majority actually feel they work harder in a competitive learning environment.

Table 5
Attitudes towards competition (base = whole sample; n=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you like it when groups have to compete?			
Yes	77	83	70
No	23	17	30
Are you competitive in school?			
Yes	58	63	52
No	42	37	48
When those around you are competing do you think you work harder?			
Yes	66	67	65
No	34	33	35
Do you think you learn more when groups compete?			
Yes	73	74	73
No	27	26	27

Boys report, as a group, a greater liking for, and engagement in competition. Interestingly the same difference between the genders is not present in respect of learning outcome. Conversely, there is a considerable proportion of the cohort, approximately one in four, who do not like competition between groups.

Positive Interdependence

It appears that within the cohort in question there is an overwhelming sense of 'being wanted as a group member', this is especially so in respect of the girls.

Table 6

Group membership-desirability (base = whole sample; n=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do other children like to have you in their group?			
Yes	82	79	85
No	18	21	15

A secondary open-ended question was asked to ascertain what it is about those who say they are liked that make them desirable group members 'Do other children like to have you in their group? If yes, why?' The written responses revealed several semantic clusters within the responses (Table 7.).

Table 7

Desirable characteristics in group participants

Reason for inclusion (semantic cluster)	Frequency	Example statements
Friendly	66	I'm friendly
Sharing (of ideas)	22	I am happy to share my ideas/speak my mind
Academic ability	20	I'm good at maths/ colouring/my tables
Humour	16	I make others laugh / I am fun to be with
Intelligence	14	I'm quite intelligent/brainy/smart/very clever/
Sporting ability	7	I'm good at sports/ running/ netball
Helpfulness	7	I'm helpful/don't mind doing things/useful
Pacificity/sociableness	5	I won't argue
Studious	4	I work hard. I'm sensible
Competitiveness	2	I'm very competitive
Honesty (ideas)	1	Because I say the truth of other ideas that others have said
Listening	1	I listen to what others have to say
Other	7	They are being nice to me and not leaving me out. I lend them money…I'm good at teamwork.. I don't know… I'm not shy

There are also a sizeable number who do not consider themselves to be desirable group members. Rather than ask these individual what it was about themselves that caused others to reject them, projection was used to elicit the information. The cohort was asked the open-ended question, 'What sort of things do you not like about some children when working in a group?' Analysis of the written responses revealed that by far the most common reason cited was that of poor behaviour. Interestingly only 5 students made any reference to academic or intellectual ability. No student made any reference to personal appearance or hygiene related factors (the SIG had wrongly suspected that these would have been amongst the most frequently given reasons).

Table 8
Undesirable characteristics in group participants

Reason for rejection (semantic cluster)	Frequency	Example statements
Poor behavior	65	They are silly.. mess around..fight...are rude.. make noises..singing
Poor listening skills	34	They don't listen when others are talking
Domineering	29	They think they are in charge of the group..bossy.. don't give anyone else a chance…take over..take all the spotlight
Over talkative	20	They talk too much.
Noisiness	20	They shout…are loud…noisy and give me headaches
Non attention/ participation	19	Slack off, take advantage, just sit there and don't help..wont take it seriously…make no effort
Distracting	15	They distract me
Name calling/rejection/ nasty/ Don't take you seriously/	13	They make fun of other people's ideas..ignore me..call me names..are unkind
Irrelevant talk/comments	8	They sometimes get on my nerves because they say the same thing twice….talk about everything else but the work
Over- speaking/ interrupting	9	They over speak me..speak when other people are speaking
Argumentative	5	They're always arguing
Failure to complete task	3	They don't get things done
Arrogance	2	They think they know it all/everything

Learning outcomes

In general terms, the majority of students consider groupwork to be a more effective learning situation than individual work (Table 9.) In relation to 'revision' opinion is reversed. This is not to suggest that groupwork is not, in the eyes of students, beneficial for examination preparation, but it is important to acknowledge that the majority of students see revision as more effective when carried out alone. Students are particularly supportive of the notion that groupwork aids concentration.

Table 9
Learning outcomes and groupwork (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you think you learn best when you work in a group or on your own?			
In a group	61	57	65
On my own	39	43	35
Does working in a group help you to focus on the task set?			
Always	28	28	27
Often	28	26	30
Sometimes	32	32	33
Rarely	6	9	4
Never	6	5	7
When you're revising do you prefer to work on your own or in a group?			
Group	37	33	42
Own	63	67	58
Does groupwork at school help you to do better in exams?			
Yes	69	68	70
No	31	32	30
Does groupwork help you to remember things you learn?			
Always	28	28	27
Often	32	35	29
Sometimes	33	28	38
Rarely	3	6	1
Never	4	3	6

Group composition and teacher involvement

The students in the study have progressed through a co-educational system and as many as 82% of students recognise a benefit in having a mixed gender group (Table 10).

Table 10
Gender balance of group composition (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you think it is good to have both boys and girls in a group?			
Always	19	15	23
Often	21	21	20
Sometimes	42	40	45
Rarely	10	13	6
Never	8	10	7

They perceive groups of around four to be preferable (Table 11).

Table 11.
Ideal group size (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
How many children make a good sized group?			
2	6	5	7
3	14	15	13
4	49	42	56
5	21	23	18
>5	11	15	7

Interestingly students clearly see value in teacher involvement (either exclusively or joint) in selecting groups (Table 12).

Table 12
Participant selection (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Who should choose the group members?			
The children	42	45	39
The teacher	19	22	15
Both teacher and children	39	33	46

Selection of groups is a matter that is obviously complex and likely to impact on outcomes (Ciani *et al.*, 2008). Students report a general perception that friendship groups are more effective learners than groups selected by teachers (Table 13). Perhaps more so on this question than on many it is important to remember that the students may have perceived certain benefits in answering in a particular way.

Table 13
Group composition and learning outcomes (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Which group learns most?			
A friendship group	67	65	70
A group chosen by teachers	33	35	30

Citizenship

Table 14
Benefit of groupwork for the development of key skills (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you think being used to working in a group will be useful when you leave school?			
Yes	87	86	89
No	13	14	11
Are you good at listening when others speak in a group?			
Always	28	26	30
Often	39	41	37
Sometimes	25	23	26
Rarely	5	8	2
Never	3	2	5
Are other children good at listening when you are speaking in a group?			
Always	17	17	18
Often	23	22	24
Sometimes	45	44	46
Rarely	10	4	6
Never	4	3	6

The vast majority of students in the cohort report that familiarity with

groupwork, as a mode of working when at school, equips them with useful skills post school (Table 14). Interestingly one desirable skill within the social field, that of listening within the group setting, is considered far more prevalent within 'self' than in others.

Self-perception & learning styles

One attribute assumed by the school improvement group to be highly significant in successful group participation was that of intellect. It appears that students do not, on the whole, recognise high intellect as a prerequisite for group participation (Table 15).

Table 15
Prerequisite qualities for group participation (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Do you think you have to be clever to work in a group?			
Yes	8	12	4
No	92	88	96

It is interesting to note that, while as many as 20% of students claimed to be shy, only 2% said they didn't enjoy working in a group (Table 16). This suggests that being shy does not preclude enjoyable group participation.

Table 16
Self reported shyness (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
Are you shy?			
Yes	20	17	22
No	80	83	78

Students were asked why it is they think it is that some students do not like to speak in a group. Responses were semantically clustered (Table 17). This provides a clear indication of perceived barriers to effective group participation by students.

Table 17
Perceived reasons for non-participation

Reason for non-participation	Frequency
Shyness	137
Fear of embarrassment	20
Lack of confidence in own idea	8
Laziness	6

Motivational theorists stress the importance of shared goals in groupwork. It seems from the responses of students that many in the cohort are not overly concerned about the success of a group (Table 18).

In this particular cohort, there is a limited tendency for students to be concerned that the group will be let down by others. Conversely, as many as 23% of students often or always worry that they will let the group down. This is of concern given the potential of anxiety to create a barrier to interpersonal effectiveness (Johnson, 1993).

Table 18
Group achievement and individual accountability (base = whole sample; *n*=248)

	% of whole sample	% of boys	% of girls
If your group doesn't do well do you feel disappointed?			
Always	6	3	9
Often	13	14	1
Sometimes	44	40	48
Rarely	19	24	15
Never	18	18	17
When you're in a group do you worry that other children will let you down?			
Always	4	5	3
Often	8	10	6
Sometimes	32	30	34
Rarely	24	25	22
Never	32	29	34
Do you ever worry that you will let the group down?			
Always	11	11	10
Often	12	13	11
Sometimes	43	46	39
Rarely	19	20	19
Never	15	10	20

Discussion

General attitude towards groupwork

Overwhelming support for groupwork was found within the cohort. In general the cohort views groupwork as enjoyable, preferable to individual work, a teaching strategy they can engage with, beneficial to learning, an aid to concentration whilst learning, helpful for memorising learning objectives and beneficial for life after school.

Only a very small number of students report an actual dislike of groupwork (2%). It is, of course, possible that this reflects error in completion of the question. Cantwell and Andrews (2002) have found that where discomfort does occur in groupwork it often relates more to psychological factors rather than cognitive factors. There always remains a need to ensure that those who do experience discomfort in groupwork, or any other learning situation, are given the necessary emotional support.

As the importance of sharing and verbalisation of ideas has become more fully recognised it is pleasing to note the willingness of the cohort to engage in such activities. There is suggestion within the findings that the method selected to elicit the thoughts of students in the groupwork setting is of considerable importance. That is to say, many more students report enjoyment in sharing ideas than, for example, brainstorming. It would be of interest to know how the same cohort would rate other techniques such as 'jigsawing'. The challenge for the teacher is to identify the most effective means of empowering every student to engage in open dialogue.

Competition

The subject of competition within the classroom has, of course, been a highly contentious and divisive issue for many years. Slavin comments

> If properly structured, competition can be a healthy, effective means of motivating individuals to perform. However, competition in the classroom is typically of a less positive nature. (Slavin, 1990, p.227)

The reality is that even if the classroom setting could be 'competition free' school leavers will encounter competition in nearly every aspect of

their life. In this study the majority of students in the sample do purport to enjoy competition even in the classroom. Conversely, a smaller but substantial proportion of students report that they do not like groups competing, do not feel they learn more in a competitive setting and are not themselves competitive. It seems that the task of the skilled teacher is to harness the motivating power of competition that Slavin (1990) refers to while, safeguarding the learning of those who dislike such a learning environment.

Positive Interdependence

An almost certain prerequisite of 'positive independence' is the knowledge, or at least belief on the part of group members that they are 'wanted'. Within the cohort the vast majority of students see themselves as desirable group members. Often the reasons they cite for believing they are 'wanted' relate to skills, knowledge, or 'achievement associated intelligence'. More frequently, however, the reason relates to affective and interpersonal characteristics; friendliness, openness and humour.

Similarly, perceived reasons for rejection as a group member appear to relate not to factors associated with academic success but to general behaviour, affective characteristics and interpersonal skills. This emphasises the importance of social skills. It is arguably the case that such skills are developed and refined through engaging in groupwork.

Positive interdependence is often encouraged through the setting of group goals or rewards. In this particular cohort there seems limited concern over group success. It may be that this position could be improved through teacher intervention and direction. Perhaps one of the greatest fears that the SIG had in promoting shared goals is that individuals within a group may feel anxious over letting the group down. This fear appears to be justified as nearly one in every four students said they worried (always or often) that they would let the group down. What remains unclear is the degree of worry that these students experience. The fact that 98% of the cohort still report enjoying groupwork would suggest that the degree of worry is not excessive. Nevertheless as 9% said they would opt for individual work if given the choice extreme care needs to be taken.

Learning outcomes

Advocates of groupwork argue that learning outcomes for students engaged in groupwork are often superior to individual learning (Onwuegbuzie, 2001). From this study it does appear that students, in general, see groupwork as a more effective means of learning than individual work, reporting that in the groupwork setting they learn more, focus more readily on the task set, do better in examinations and are able to remember what they have learned more readily. In contrast, when it comes to revision for examinations the majority of students prefer to revise on their own. This may be because students continue to see examinations as an individual based task. It seems that the educational system has an unresolved issue to face in that students are increasingly being exposed to groupwork based teaching but are often assessed through individual examination performance.

Group composition and teacher involvement

It has been recognised for some time (see for example Tann, 1981) that differences do exist between the genders in relation to problem solving strategies. Tann (1981) recommends single sex learning groups. Others such as Webb (1991) have proposed alternatives, for example, balanced numbers of boys and girls. This study clearly indicates a strong preference within the cohort for mixed gender groups. This may reflect the solely co-educational experience of the cohort, or an intuitive understanding of the need to balance the difference in approach to problem solving found between the genders. It may, of course, simply be a reflection of the hormonal influences of adolescence at the time of questioning! The re-emergence of single sex classes within co-educational schools is at odds with preferences for mixed gender groups in the cohort and has, as Jackson (2002) points out, wider implications in respect of the social learning of the students.

The favoured group size within the cohort is 4 to 5. Groups of this size are commonly termed 'classroom group' (Kutnick, 1994). Kutnick (1994) suggests that studies that focus on such groups are hard to generalise from due to differences in the way the groups were put together and the task set. It is, therefore, interesting to note that having not specified a task or selection criteria the cohort showed a preference for this group size.

The fact that 58% of students value the role of the teacher in membership selection is perhaps an acknowledgement of the need for ownership of the decision, at least in part, to be placed outside of the group. In this way it is likely that many students will feel they have a mandate for inclusion and this will also allow scope for further development of 'positive interdependence'. Although the cohort endorsed the value of teacher involvement the students' responses suggest that friendship based groups, as opposed to teacher selected groups, learn more. This latter finding is consistent with work of Ciani et al. (2008), who found a positive association between students choosing their own groups and intrinsic motivation.

Citizenship

No doubt, a key purpose for educators in adopting groupwork techniques is to equip students with the citizenship skills. It is perhaps an encouragement, therefore, to note that as many as 87% of the cohort already consider that groupwork skills will be of benefit to them when they leave school. It appears that the growth in popularity of citizenship education has run ahead of the formulation of an agreed citizenship curriculum (see for example Davies and Evans, 2002). Groupwork should, due to its versatility and efficacy, be central to the citizenship curriculum. It has a vital role to play in enabling young people to experience, develop and explore citizenship skills.

Self perception and learning styles

Effective groupwork is clearly, in the eyes of the cohort, not dependent upon intellect. In keeping with the reasons given by students for exclusion from groups the cohort overwhelmingly rejected the notion that a student has to be 'clever' to contribute.

Although only 1 in 5 students described themselves as shy, over half the cohort cited shyness as a perceived inhibitor to verbal participation in groupwork. This is perhaps more revealing than self reported shyness. What is clear is that students recognise shyness as an inhibitor in groupwork and at a systemic level teachers need to be applying strategies to overcome the impact of shyness. Crozier and Perkins (2002) have shown that shyness affects verbal behaviour in situations

that are more structured than routine conversations. This suggests that in constructing groupwork tasks teachers need to create informal conditions in which shy students are most at ease.

Implications for future practice

A degree of caution needs to be exercised when seeking to generalise from the findings of this survey. It must be borne in mind, for example, that the questionnaire only sought the students' general views on groupwork. The results may have differed had a particular lesson or groupwork scenario been used as research stimuli. Nevertheless, in this study students have clearly indicated their enjoyment of, and overwhelming support for groupwork.

Through engaging in the initiative the SIG uncovered differing perceptions on key issues relating to groupwork; firstly amongst staff but also between students and staff. This diversity of opinion is perhaps unsurprising given the diversity of views amongst the student population. What is required are highly skilled teachers who are able to discern how best to apply a variety of groupwork techniques, thus enabling continuity across classrooms and safeguarding individual learning.

Of greater concern is when staff as a whole report that they feel students have a certain view but the student cohort rejects that assertion. The SIG, for example, were of the opinion that the greatest perceived barrier to valued group membership is that of personal appearance and hygiene whereas, in keeping with the research of others (Doel, 2004), students actually cite 'poor behaviour'. In fact, not a single student cited personal appearance or hygiene. Some teachers may wish to reprioritise this issue and revisit strategies to understand, manage or rechannel 'low-level poor behaviour' in groupwork.

Given the fast moving social care modernisation agenda, Preston-Shoot (2007) suggests that there is a pressing need to locate groupwork in practice. The widespread endorsement of groupwork by children and young people within this study suggests that this process of embedding groupwork in practice is already well underway in some parts of the educational system and bodes well, therefore, for the establishment of groupwork within wider society.

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