

## ENHANCING TEACHER COMPETENCIES IN ORGANIZING GROUPWORK

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### Introduction

Groupwork is a common method of teaching at any level in the field of education from primary level to tertiary level. Working with students is immensely facilitated by groupwork. Clark (1996) and Fairbrother (2000) suggest several advantages in providing opportunities for children to work in groups. The education reforms introduced in 1997 emphasize the importance of groupwork in primary grades in developing the basic competencies of individuals.

Working in groups facilitate cooperative learning and helps students develop several skills such as expressing opinions, listening to others, sharing ideas and presenting findings members of their groups. When a student is working in a group he/she learns to work as a member of a group, help each other, and think and plan together. The experience gained in working in groups during childhood is important to an individual throughout his/her life. As Mukalel suggests ( 1998, p.18) "Group method requires planning and preparation, perhaps a greater degree of planning than a regular class calls for, Therefore teachers need to be competent in organizing groupwork effectively in order to get the maximum benefit out of it."

The aim of this study is to suggest ways in which teacher competencies can be enhanced in organizing groupwork at primary level.

### Specific Objectives

- To identify weaknesses of primary teachers in planning and conducting groupwork.
- To find out difficulties faced by primary teachers in organizing groupwork
- To prepare lesson plans with teachers in order to carry out effective groupwork
- To try out planned lessons with teachers using groupwork technique.

### Methodology

This study consisted of three phases. In the first phase data were collected using participant observation, a questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews in order to identify the weaknesses of teachers in conducting groupwork and the difficulties faced by them in organizing groupwork. During participant observation ten primary classrooms were observed in three schools in the Kegalle District. Transcripts were prepared for all observed lessons with the help of field notes and tape-recorded data. A questionnaire was administered to 50 primary teachers and 25 teachers were interviewed to obtain clarifications on

the data obtained from classroom observations. Data obtained from the above sources were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

During the second phase of the study lesson plans were prepared with the help of teachers to conduct groupwork effectively in classrooms. Planned lessons were tried out with teachers in the third phase of the study.

### **Results**

It was revealed that although students were seated in groups in all classrooms only a few lessons (16 out of 112) were conducted as real groupwork. In most of the classes students played a passive role listening and following instructions or copying from the blackboard. However, the responses of the questionnaire revealed that 54% of teachers use groupwork as the most common method in the teaching and learning process. This indicates that although teachers thought that they practice groupwork they were not really doing this. 24% of the teachers gave limited space as a difficulty while 19% regarded as a difficulty.

In considering teachers' weaknesses regarding organizing groupwork it was apparent that teachers were not paying adequate attention to creating students' interest in groupwork, to the preparation of sufficient material, providing clear instructions, encouraging discussions among group members, to students' active involvement, and to debriefing at the end of the activity. All these are essential in organizing groupwork with students.

In the second stage teachers planned lessons with detailed lesson plans considering all aspects of groupwork. The material needed for all the groups was well prepared and the instructions were provided very clearly, allowing students to understand what they really had to do during groupwork. All groups actively participated in the groupwork, and the outcome of the groupwork was a collaborative effort of the group members. Students had a lot of opportunities to express their ideas, listen to group members, and to discuss with others within their groups.

### **Discussion**

Most of the primary teachers were not organizing groupwork effectively in order to achieve the objective of using groupwork as they do not possess an opportunity to enhance and update their professional skills. Lack of preparation prior to the class is one of the most prominent weaknesses in teachers' handling of groupwork. Students were not given opportunities to develop various skills through group activities since teachers failed to consider the broad aspects of groupwork. When teachers planned lessons with detailed lesson plans it provided opportunities for students to engage in groupwork effectively.

### **Conclusion**

Groupwork is not successfully implemented in classrooms as expected in the primary education reforms introduced in 1997. Continuous collaborative work with primary teachers is needed to enhance their professional skills in order to implement primary education reforms more successfully.

## References

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