

Organising group talk activity in the primary classroom

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Grouping the children

Three in a group

The children will work *as a group*, rather than individually. They will be talking and listening to each other. They will be justifying what they think and, where appropriate, they will be challenging what others think. The children will be use and develop their skills of managing a debate within their group, where the teacher has minimal input. The ideal number recommended per group for these activities is three. There are ten sets of resources for each lesson so that groups of three can be easily achieved. More than three in a group can result in non-participation and working in pairs may limit the quality of the discussion the children have. Ideally the children should stay in the same groups of three for all the lessons. Where groups cannot be made with equal numbers, then a group of four is preferable to one of two.

Mixed ability

The objective of the activities is for children to develop their understanding in the topic area being covered. They will also be developing the skills of argument, including learning to support their ideas with evidence. The activities are designed so that progress can be made, whatever the current level or ability of the child. The most important factor in whether or not progress is made is that the children are engaged actively in effective discussion. For lower achieving children, this is much more likely to happen in a mixed ability group. For higher achieving children, the open-ended nature of the lessons, the teacher's questioning and the opportunities for discussion between groups should ensure that their progress is not in any way limited by working in a mixed ability group.

Getting on

In order for the children to make progress, they need to be able to work well together. For this reason, it may be most effective to group children with other children that they like and get on well with. While for some children, working closely with their friends may be counter-productive, for others it may have the opposite effect and lead to a very good group dynamic. It is preferable to leave the groups as they are for all the lessons, moving children only when really necessary.



Shared Rules

Before the activities are used, it is helpful for the children to have practised talking in groups so that they establish some shared rules for group talk. The better they already are at group talk, the more likely it is that the activities will enable them to make progress in science. Children need to understand and experience that in their discussions, there will be times when people agree and times when they don't. Part of what the children will learn is how to manage the times when they disagree and that these times can be helpful to them for developing their understanding of the concepts they are discussing. If they have not yet established good group talk practices, engaging with the activities themselves will enable them to make progress with this (although the scope for making progress with conceptual development in science may then be reduced).

Strategies for facilitating effective group talk

Paired discussion

This can be used to ensure high levels of participation and to keep discussions well focused. It is also appropriate for quick tasks such as initial sharing of ideas or recalling previous work. A third person in this situation can act as an observer, reporter or note-taker or can be given a task such as summarising the discussion of the other two.

Listening threes

This strategy is very helpful for developing good listening as the children not only take on the role of listener, but also take on the role of an observer which gives them the opportunity to witness the effectiveness of good listening. The children take on the roles of talker, questioner, and observer/recorder. The talker starts by explaining something, constructing an argument or expressing an opinion. The questioner prompts and seeks clarification. The observer/recorder makes notes and gives a short report at the end of the conversation. The activity should have a strict time limit, e.g. two minutes for the talker to start, two minutes for the questioner to clarify and one minute for the observer/recorder to report. The next time, the children change roles. If children are working in a group of four, this strategy can still be used, with the extra child taking the role of another observer/recorder.



Regrouping

Having worked in threes, two groups can get together to regroup as three pairs, where each pair contains one child from each group. Each pair can share the ideas of their original group and then report back to the group. Next time, the groups of three could be paired up in different combinations.

Envoys

Once groups have carried out a task, one child from each group can become an 'envoy' where they move to another group. With the new group, they can either explain and summarise their group's ideas and/or find out about the new group's ideas. Afterwards, the envoy can return to their original group to report back. This can be used very effectively instead of a longer whole class feedback session. It is also very helpful to the envoy as they are forced to clarify their thinking in order to be able to explain it to a new group.

Role play

Asking children to take on a role or particular viewpoint can help them understand more clearly another point of view or how another might see the world. The children need to be given good briefing cards or information and the outcome should be made clear. For children worried about expressing their own ideas, taking on a given role as someone else may enable them to develop the skills of argument more comfortably.

Adapted by Alison Eley from 'Talk Box' by L. Dawes and C. Sams (2004) and 'Ideas, Evidence and Argument in Science (IDEAS) Project' by J. Osborne, S. Eduran and S. Simon (2004)

