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Classroom interaction among children

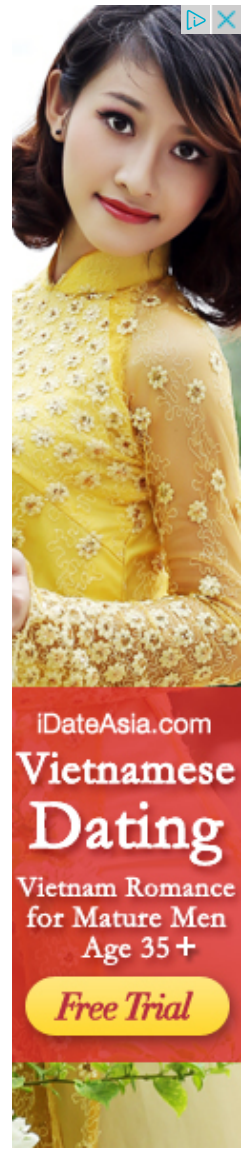


Research supports the view that joint activity among pupils should be an intrinsic, integrated aspect of classroom life.

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It is not uncommon for a teacher to hear pupils whisper to each other mid-way through a lesson. Whispering often turns into class chattering and loud discussions, climaxing into a loud "Stop talking!" by the teacher. But not all class talk is chit-chat, research says.

In a report focusing on primary schools, published this week, researchers Christine Howe and Neil Mercer, professors of education at the University of Cambridge, say that, under certain conditions, children's interaction with other classmates helps children's learning and development.

"The expression of different views, such as alternative explanations or possible solutions to problems among children working together, seems to be particularly useful in stimulating learning and development: and it does not seem necessarily to matter if those differences are always resolved (or resolved productively) through discussion."

The research, entitled Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction And Classroom Learning, is one of a series of 32 interim reports conducted in pursuit of the Primary Review, an independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England, supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

While the evidence relates to a range of subjects, including science, mathematics and art, the researchers believe that encouraging children to pursue joint goals, explain their understanding, express different points of view and attempt to reach consensus through discussion have all been found to help learning and understanding. The evidence relates to a range of curriculum subjects, across the arts, science and mathematics.

Class discussion also helps children develop important communicative skills which they may not always be able to learn if they had to converse only with adults. More importantly, not only class discussion stands to gain, but the children's individual skills in reasoning and academic attainment also stand to profit: The interventions observed by the researchers showed that "group experience of explicit, rational, collaborative problem-solving improved their individual reasoning capabilities."

However, from their classroom observations, the researchers are unsure about what did the children learn from their experience that made the difference. "It may be that some picked up new, successful problem-solving strategies explained to them by their partners, while others may have benefited from having to justify and make explicit their own reasons. But a more radical and intriguing possibility is that children may have improved their reasoning skills by internalising or appropriating the ground rules of exploratory talk, so that they become able to carry on a kind of silent rational dialogue with themselves."

Since primary schoolchildren are believed capable of productive discussion, the difference between unproductive class talk and collaborative talk lies in the way the latter is promoted in

a classroom. In particular, "that potential may only be realised if children are given structured guidance by their teachers on how to make the most of the opportunities that those activities offer".

The researchers point out to studies which have suggested ways of promoting collaborative talk and of improving the quality of discussions, such as tasks and activities designed to encourage cooperation and group cohesion rather than competitiveness; developing an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect; teaching the children to become more aware of how they use language as a tool for thinking together; and teaching children specific strategies for carrying on productive discussions.

Studying the socio-cultural perspective as applied to education has also led the researchers to confirm that children's social histories affect the way they engage in collaborative learning, and also affect their social learning both in and out of school. This is because "development and learning are shaped to a significant extent by social and communicative interactions. These interactions will inevitably reflect the historical development, cultural values and social practices of the societies and communities in which schools and other educational institutions exist, as well as the more local cultures and practices within particular schools and classrooms".

Factors such as gender, temperament, the existence of a competitive or cooperative environment, and the social relations among children can affect the ways in which they engage in joint activity, as can their social experience outside school which can mould their behaviour. This means that some children require more guidance than others on how to build up productive conversations in class.

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