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Teachers' leadership and students' experience of group work

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ABSTRACT

Group work is used as a means of learning at all levels of most educational systems. However, teachers often use group work without considering its “pros and cons.” Such a mode of non-reflected application may sometimes end up in positive experiences and learning, but the likelihood is that the outcome will be the opposite.

The aim of this qualitative study is to address students' experiences of collaborative group work, that is, when working as a group. What features do students emphasise in their experiences and descriptions of constructive and destructive group work? A prime aim is to give the students a voice in the matter. Data was collected by means of six focus groups with students aged 13-16, and a qualitative content analysis was performed.

The originality of this research is three-folded. First, it discloses what students consider as important requisites for a successful group work. Their inside knowledge about classroom activities end up in a list (a taxonomy) of crucial conditions for high-quality group work. Second, the conditions mentioned by the students have all been confirmed by recent scientific research. Thus, thirdly, the present study may provide teachers with evidence-based knowledge about successful group work.

Keywords: Group work, Collaborative learning, Cooperative learning, Teachers' leadership

INTRODUCTION

There is strong scientific support of the benefits of students learning and working in groups. Comprehensive research reviews and studies (Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Lou et al., 1996; Slavin, 1996) have verified that learning in groups has several advantages compared with traditional lessons. Even if group work is defined as “pupils working together as a group or a team” (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003, p. 155), it is important to differentiate between working *in* a group and working *as* a group. A number of experimental and naturalistic studies have shown that people *in* a group work faster and produce more when other individuals are present (Zajonc, 1980; Baron, 1986). This applies to simple and routine tasks. The benefits of working with individual tasks in a group are not an effect of cooperation but rather social facilitation. The assumption behind social facilitation is that individuals produce better when they know that others are observing them. However, this is when they are not working *as* a group, just working *in* a group. The objective of this study is to capture the students’ view of group work.

Students’ experiences of group work

In this study, we are interested in students’ experiences of what they think constitutes meaningful group work and what enables them to work *as* a group. Even if group work in education has been examined in numerous studies, there is still much to be discovered concerning students’ experiences of group work in schools. There are few reports from a student perspective (Cantwell & Andrews, 2002; Hansen, 2006; Peterson & Miller, 2004; Underwood, 2003). To sum up the results, positive experiences resulted from the necessity of all group members participating and showing respect for each other. In addition, the students emphasise the importance of understandable goals, tasks, and organisation (Hansen, 2006). According to Underwood (2003) and Peterson and Miller (2004), there is also a problem with students who do not contribute to the group work, so-called free-riders.

Given the limited number of studies, it is obvious that more studies concerning the participants’ perspective on group work in education is desirable. The purpose of this study is to investigate the students’ experiences and conceptions of high-quality and low-quality group work and analyse if their opinions have support in small group research?

Cooperative versus collaborative learning

There are principally two approaches concerning learning in group work, namely *cooperative learning* and *collaborative learning*. Bennet and Dunne (1992) as well as Galton and Williamson (1992) use *cooperative group work* as a description of situations where pupils are sitting together in a group but working individually on separate parts of a group task. At the end of the assignment, they put the separate parts together to form a joint product. A cooperative group could be working on a divisible or a unitary task (Hammar Chiriack, 2008; Steiner, 1972). Consequently, cooperative learning may occur in group work without any interaction between the students.

Collaborative group work presupposes that all group members are involved in and working on a common task in order to produce a joint outcome, in other words, working *as* a group (Bennet & Dunne, 1992; Galton & Williamson, 1992; Webb & Palincsar, 1996). It is characterised by a common effort, utilisation of the group’s competences, including problem solving and reflection, or as Steiner (1972) named it, conjunctive group work.

Even though there are distinct differences between the concepts of cooperative group work and collaborative group work, as described above, they are frequently used interchangeably (Hammar Chiriac, 2010b; Webb & Palincsar, 1996). Furthermore, a number of evaluations of group work do not take into consideration what kind of group work is involved, namely whether individuals are working *in* a group or *as* a group. The focus of the present investigation is to scrutinise premises for successful collaborative group work in the classroom. We do not take group work skills among the students for granted and therefore assume that it is probably not enough to present a task and then invite the students to work with it in groups. We are convinced that educational leadership and classroom management need to be practiced in a carefully planned way when introducing group work in classes. Thereby the students' experiences shall not be neglected.

AIMS

The main purpose of this study is to address the students' experiences and conceptions of high-quality and low-quality group work in school. How do students age 13-16 describe good and bad group work? What features do students emphasise in their descriptions of constructive and destructive group work, and what support do their opinions have in small group research?

METHOD

In order to capture the students' experiences and conceptions of group work, an inductive qualitative research approach, which emphasises content and meaning rather than quantification, was applied (Breakell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw, & Smith, 2007; Bryman, 2001). Data are based on focus groups, which is a well-tried method for collecting data (Millward, 2007; Morgan, 1997). The discussions in the focus groups were taped and transcribed. A qualitative content analysis was performed based on these transcriptions.

Participants

The informants came from three schools in Sweden (Table 1). Schools and students (age 13-16) from different social and geographical areas were included. The research group consisted of 21 male and 20 female informants. Each focus group interview lasted a mean of 40 minutes. The present study focuses on different characteristics of high-quality and low-quality group work (i.e. good and bad points of the method). In this study, the focus is not on different student groups as the number of subjects is too restricted to permit any analyses of group differences, with respect to gender, ethnicity, or school achievement. However, the sample was based on talkative students with different social backgrounds, mirroring the student bodies of the different schools.

The taxonomy (list of prerequisites for successful group work) created in this study will be used to carry out a forthcoming study considering the students' backgrounds, in order to disclose any differences in attitude to the method due to gender, ethnicity, or achievement.

Insert Table 1, *Description of participants*, here

Data collection

It was important that the students were fairly talkative and had something to say about the issue in question. The class teacher selected the students for participation in the focus groups. Four questions were used to guide the interviews.

1. What constitutes group work in a school setting?
2. How would you describe good group work?
3. How would you describe bad group work?
4. If I came to your class as a teacher and wanted to do group work, what should I think about?

The first question was aimed at getting the students to feel confident in the situation. The second and the third questions were the actual research questions. The fourth question was a control question and gave the informants another chance to emphasise important features of group work.

All six focus group interviews were conducted without any difficulties. One of the researchers acted as a moderator in all of the focus groups.

Analysis

After the interviews had been transcribed, a qualitative content analysis was performed (Bryman, 2001; Millward, 2007). The analysis, which emphasised the construction of meaning instead of quantification, was carried out in several steps by two independent researchers. First, all statements were listed no matter who the informant was. The second step implied that similar statements were collected in different clusters. These clusters were labelled preliminary according to the common content. The judges carried out this procedure independently. Thirdly, after the assessments were finished, the two judgments were compared and they proved to coincide with respect to content and statements. However, the preliminary labels differed, not with reference to the meaning but in formulation. After discussion, the labels used in this presentation were decided. Six major characteristics turned out to be important for the understanding of the students' conception of the meaning of group work in school. Finally, a comparison with the fourth (control) question revealed congruency. This procedure implies that the clusters (aspects) were created by an inductive process. The authors had no idea beforehand about any aspects; they emerged entirely from the students' statements.

Ethics

The British Psychology Society's four ethical principles have formed a guideline (BPS, 2006) for the present study. The ethical principle, which emphasises concern for participants' interests, has been adhered to throughout the study (APA, 2002; Barrett, 2007; BPS, 2004).

RESULTS

In line with the aim of addressing the students' experiences and conceptions of high-quality and low-quality group work in school, the major part of the presentation of the results will deal with the students' descriptions. It is also important to determine the relevance of the results compared with the prevailing research domain in order to consider whether the results can be verified by findings from previous and recent scientific studies. In this presentation, we will first account for the students' opinion of what real group work is. This will be followed by a presentation of recent scientific research with respect to the features put forward by the students. Thereby, it will be possible to compare the students' "experience-based" opinions with evidence-based research.

Group work in school settings

The students seem to have a clear conception of what constitutes group work and what does not. According to the students, genuine group work is characterised by collaboration, in an assignment given by the teacher. They describe group work as working together with their classmates on a common task.

The students distinguished between group work (as described above) and cooperation where the latter is more about helping a classmate sitting next to him or her. In such cases, students have chosen to work as individuals and to consult each other.

The students' reports also reveal that group work is something you do in a more mutual way during an allotted period of time, while assisting a classmate is more of a one-way and temporary activity. Table 2 summarises the different modes of working together in the classroom based on the students' reports.

Insert Table 2, *Different modes of working together in the classroom, according to the students*, here.

The conclusion is that group work, as described by the students, is characterised by collaboration in a common and planned task during an allotted period of time. The differences between “real group work” (collaboration) and cooperation coincide with the definitions presented by way of introduction in this paper, for instance Damon and Phelps (1989), Galton and Williamson (1992), Hammar Chiriac (2008, 2010a), and Webb and Palincsar (1996).

Students' experiences of high- and low-quality group work

The forthcoming presentation of the results will focus on how students describe good and bad group work. As described previously, the analyses of the focus groups, based on the students' statements, resulted in six main aspects of group work that were found to be crucial. Each aspect displayed a positive variant supporting constructive group work as well as a negative position underpinning fruitless work. The six aspects derived from the data were (a) organisation of group work conditions, (b) mode of working in groups, (c) tasks given in group work, (d) reporting group work, (e) assessment of group work, and (f) the role of the teacher in group work. Even though the students did not present their opinions consciously in these six categories, these aspects were important to the process and the outcome of group work. The classification is a result of a systematic content analysis performed by the authors but solely based on the students' statements.

Below, the six aspects will be presented. Certainly, these six aspects could be seen as a lay theory or as an excuse for not taking responsibility for joint group work. However, all six aspects recur, in one way or another, in recent scientific small-group research. Consequently, we will also discuss the students' opinions of each aspect in relation to scientific findings. Thereby, it will be evident that the students' “lay theory” coincides with current research. In order to outline the presentation, an overview is given in Table 3.

Insert Table 3, *Aspects and subcategories promoting and inhibiting high-quality group work*, here

The main purpose of Table 3 is to present the results in a way that is easy to grasp. Certainly, this is a simplification, but the table shows that the crucial aspects presented by the students apply to both good and bad group work.

Organisation of group work conditions

As shown in Table 3, there are four main subcategories of organisation conditions that are described by the students, viz, group size, composition, time, and location. The organisation aspect concerns the issue of group construction, which seems to have a large impact on the groups' work, process, and outcome.

Group size. It is obvious, from the students' reports, that a group with about three members is considered to be the optimal size. The students feel that larger groups with more than six members, for example, are a hindrance to good group work. A group that is too small may also lead to negative consequences. The size of the group has to be just large enough to carry out the task within the allotted time.

Mix of members. The students seem to prefer a group composition that is not too heterogeneous as regards to interest and competence. It appears to be important that they can relate to at least one other member in the group. It is also obvious that they believe that groups composed of students who do not like each other is a hindrance to good group work. The replies reveal uncertainty among the participants concerning who should decide on the composition of the group, the students or the teacher. The determining factor seems to be the aim of the group work, to learn a subject or to learn to work together. Thus, group composition seems to be an important and even determining precondition for students' positive or negative experiences of group work.

Time. It is important that the time allotted to the group is adapted to the task. The students seem to have extensive experience of too short time allocated to group work; nevertheless, they usually try to complete the work at school. However, they also use breaks to finish the task.

Location. An important condition for successful group work is access to a calm place to work in. Access to group rooms might be one way of avoiding stressful surroundings and promoting high-quality group work.

Summing up. According to the students, a well-organised group work consists of approximately three, not too heterogeneous, members allotted reasonable time and an environment that is not too noisy.

Research confirming the students' opinions about organisation conditions

Contemporary research vis-à-vis organisation of group work, for instance Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick (2008) and Kutnick, Blatchford, and Baines (2002)) stresses the importance of finding an optimum combination of group size, mix of students, and nature of the task.

Group size. Previous studies of group work in schools show that the optimum size of groups of adults has been estimated to be five persons or fewer (Shaw, 1976; Brown, 2000). Larger groups have problems with processing information. Thus, the students' experiences seem to be supported by research. Too large of groups can hinder participation in discussions (Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Lou et al., 1996; Webb, 1989). It has also been found that triads may result in

possible domination of the third member by the other two members, especially if there are two boys and one girl in the group (Cullingford, 1988; Slavin, 1990; Webb, 1991). An equal number is preferable.

Mix of members. Group composition may be carried out in several ways (Lou et al., 1996), but as Gillies and Boyle (2010) highlight, the formation of groups is often completed by the teacher without any further considerations for composition or group activity. If the allocation is self-assigned, there might be a higher risk of an increasing social division in the class based on, for instance, gender or ability (Blatchford et al., 2003) and also friendship or housing. Albeit, there are findings indicating that friendship may support both learning and non-task-related activities. Gillies and Boyle (2010) conclude that the evidence is ambiguous. A compromise or suggestion (Blatchford et al., 2003) is to include the students in the discussion and make a joint decision.

There is little evidence of grouping by ability (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996). Gender and friendship seems to be more important (Wheelan, 1996). However, some results indicate that students, in general, benefit from working in mixed-ability groups (Gillies & Boyle 2010). This is in particular true about high- and low-ability students that may profit from heterogeneous groups (Gillies & Boyle 2010; Lou et al., 1996). High-ability students seem to benefit from providing elaborated responses to low-ability students who, in turn, receive instructions and answers in language they are able to comprehend. Medium-ability students, on the other hand, may profit from homogenous groups. If medium-ability students actively participated in the group discussion, they may also benefit from group work.

The gender composition in groups is an issue that must be considered (Gillies & Boyle 2010). Gender-balanced groups appear to stimulate equal opportunities for girls as well as boys considering interaction and achievement. If the groups consisted of mostly one of the sexes, the boys outperformed the girls irrespective of ability. Hence, if the groups consisted of mostly boys, the girls were neglected, and if the opposite allocation existed, the girls spent the majority of time trying to include the boys in the group work.

Location. Making provision for a suitable group work context can also be discussed in terms of *physical situation*, for instance, noise (Davies, 1994). Concerning location, the open-plan design used in most classrooms, furnished for lecturers, might not be the best arrangement for group work. In order to encourage group work, it is important that the classroom contexts, for example, layout, furniture, and seating arrangements as well as the resources distributed, are organised to promote this work form (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2008). One way of creating a calmer environment, as wished for by the students in this study, might be to increase proximity among students in the group. However, Baines et al. (2008) point to the teachers' unwillingness to move the furniture in the classroom in order to provide seating appropriate for group work. Thus, an easygoing teacher may be a hindrance to arranging optimum conditions for the students' group work.

Time. The division of lessons into separate periods of 45 to 60 minutes may be a hindrance to the group's activities and work (Stevens, 2008). The students in this study tried to find strategies for increasing the allotted time by using breaks and lunches, which implies that teachers do not always think things through when assigning time for group work. According to Postholm (2008), the organisation and structuring of group work is of great importance when it comes to creating conditions in which learning will occur.

As evident from the presentation above, the students' intuitive reflections on group work organisation coincide with scientific research.

Mode of working in groups

The students mentioned two conditions (Table 3) as being important when it comes to the mode of working in groups. The first one concerns whether the members focus on the core task or not, and the other is whether all the members or just a few of them participate in the common work.

Focus on task. Successful group work is characterised by the members being focused on the task, which means that they spend time on understanding and planning the work. In unsuccessful groups, the members focus on other things, for instance, social or private issues. The reason for this is not made explicit, but a qualified guess is that the task may be ambiguous and too hard to grasp.

As long as there is an effective use of time, a variation in working mode is possible. Sometimes it is in the group's interest to divide the task among the group members and, after a while, meet again and put the pieces together. On other occasions, the group may benefit from working together throughout the group work. It is obvious that the students demand tasks that are intelligible to all the group members. Otherwise, it is hard for them to focus on the core problem.

Participation. A crucial point seems to be that all the members take part in the work, which means that all group participants are at the group's disposal with their special competences. When some members do not participate in the common work, such an attitude is detrimental to the work of the group as a whole.

Active participation and willingness to contribute to the common goal are closely connected to a realistic ambition. The students reveal that it is important to keep one's ambition at a reasonable level. Otherwise, it could have a destructive effect on the group's work, activities, and outcome.

Participation was the most discussed subject in all of the focus groups. A plausible interpretation might be that this aspect is very important for the students' ability to carry out satisfactory group work.

To sum up. The students are fully aware that successful group work calls for members with appropriate skills that are focused on the task and that all members take part in the common work.

Research confirming the students' opinions about mode of working in groups

Recent research, with reference to mode of working in groups, displays that in order to be active, at least two crucial prerequisites must be satisfied. The students need to have appropriate skills for the task and to be able to cooperate.

Focus on task. According to Peterson and Miller (2004) along with Topping (2005), students will experience positive involvement in group work when they have appropriate skills for the task. A very important aspect in the case of group work is that the students must be trained for such a mode of working, that is, to be able to focus on the task. Cohen (1994) and Gillies

(2008) argue that students need to be trained to listen, explain, argue, and share ideas. This is not an innate ability; it has to be practised. Ashman and Gillies (1997) showed that group training conducted by the teacher had a striking effect. Compared to control groups, the trained children were more cooperative, helpful, and tried to involve each other in the common task. They also performed better on learning outcome tests. Such results indicate very clearly that aspects such as the ability to focus on the task and participatory activity are not only necessary features of group work; they also have to be practised and incorporated by the students.

Participation. Inclusion and cooperation are crucial preconditions for the learning outcome. Lotan (2006) concludes that students who participate less have lower learning gains as well as have difficulties with their wellbeing. Cohen (1994) stresses the need for teachers to convince the students that no single group member has all the abilities to complete the given task in order to create expectations about cooperation. The importance of teachers' reflection and preparation seems to be a determining factor for the students' cooperation.

Once again, the students' reflections are confirmed by recent research.

Tasks given in group work

The third crucial aspect put forward by the students (Table 3) brings to the fore the common task that the students are supposed to handle. According to the students, the focus seems to be on two conditions, viz the task must be intelligible as well as stimulating.

Intelligible tasks. The students emphasise the importance of intelligible tasks. If the students do not understand the assignment, they are unable to start working, which in turn may tempt them to turn to other activities. The students explain that a characteristic of bad group work is when you do not grasp the task.

Stimulating tasks. In addition to being intelligible, the tasks also need to be stimulating and to arouse the students' curiosity. An interesting task seems to promote high-quality group work and have a positive influence on the students' willingness to work. A boring task, on the other hand, may have a devastating effect on the students' motivation and lead to low participation and bad quality. The students give several examples of group work where one or two persons have done all the work. Only the most dutiful students try to carry out the task, perhaps in order to maintain their own grades.

Summing up. The necessary requirements of tasks, given by the teacher, are that they are understandable and challenging or teasing in some sense.

Research confirming the students' opinions about tasks given in group work

Earlier studies by Steiner (1966, 1972, 1976) have shown that the *task* as such is very important, perhaps the most important feature, with regard to work outcome and the students' experience of group work.

Intelligible tasks. Motivation for and understanding of the task ahead have a great influence on the group processes and how the members will attend to the work. "Real group work" is characterised by a common effort, utilisation of the group's competence and some sort of joint problem solving (Hammar Chiriak, 2008). Granström (2006) points to the fact that this kind of group work rarely occurs in Swedish schools. Instead, group work often consists of one or a

few of the group's members' contributions, while the others are occupied with something else since they have not understood the real object of the group work.

Stimulating tasks. Motivation and understanding the task set by the teacher seem to be essential for a positive experience and a fruitful outcome of group work, this is a fact noted by researchers as well as by the students in this study. Previous research has shown that one way of increasing motivation and cooperation in group work is to assign tasks that create positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Positive interdependence creates responsibility forces and accountability, which, in turn, promotes the willingness to work on the group assignment. The importance of the teachers' engaging and appealing introduction of the group task is highlighted by Gillies, Ashman, and Terwel (2008), together with the teachers' responsiveness to the students' task-related questions and personal needs. This opinion is, as can be seen, supported by educational research.

Different kinds of group tasks require different kinds of cooperation behaviours (Lotan, 2006). Different types of cooperation behaviours do not emerge automatically. "New behaviours are to be explicitly introduced, recognised, labelled, discussed, predicted, and reinforced" (p. 529). However, what the students implicitly indicate, in the present study, is that they do not have such training.

Reporting group work

Reports on group work (the forth aspect, Table 3) are usually presented at the very end of the allotted time. This is an important aspect exerting an influence on the students' experiences of the entire group work. Perceptions of low-quality group work can be explained by bad experiences of report procedures and performances. Three features are crucial for the students with respect to good reports: content, performance, and responsibility.

Content of a report. The core content of the report is crucial. However, it is also important that the students' own and other groups' presentations are well prepared and presented in an understandable way. The students express a wish to learn even from the reports and do not appreciate a messy presentation.

Performance style. A good performance is, according to the informants, lively and captures the audience's attention. The presentation must not be hard to follow otherwise you will lose the audience. Understandable language, not too many boring facts, and just the right pace are elements of great importance for a high-quality presentation. The students want an absorbing and instructive summary and not a boring word-by-word presentation.

Responsibility for the report. Like the previous aspects, responsibility seems to be an essential element of the report. All group members must be involved and take responsibility for the presentation even if they divide the performance into individual parts. Bad experiences, reported by the students, concerning group reports are often connected to reports where just a few members contributed to the group's joint presentation.

To sum up. In order to get meaningful reports on group work, the students point to the importance of well-organised and high-quality presentations where all members are active.

Research confirming the students' opinions about reporting group work

Contemporary scientific research concerning reporting group work comprises the prerequisites put forward by the students.

Content of the reports. Huber and Huber (2008) conclude that “a collaborative working team has to come to a shared understanding of the task and produce together one text as a final product” (p. 114). The students, in the present study, imply that the report phase ought to be a learning opportunity and not only a control station.

Performance style. If the presentation takes the form of an oral presentation, it enters the public arena of the classroom. In such cases, the presentation and the “presenters” become visible to the auditorium, which requires the students to be actors (Jaques, 2000). Social facilitation as well as social loafing might occur in such situations (Hammar Chiriac, 2010a).

Responsibility. Accountability is closely related to responsibility for reporting an assignment. Johnson and Johnson (2008) discuss the pros and cons of group versus individual accountability. According to earlier research, both forms of accountability may increase responsibility as well as supporting interdependence among group members. The report can take the form of separate oral presentations presented one after another in front of the class or a document containing several separate pieces combined into one document without any connecting thought (Granström, 2006). To increase the willingness of individual group members to contribute to the final report, both group and individual accountability should be high (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Thus, both individual contributions and a common responsibility for the final outcome should be included in the final account.

Recent research supports the students' opinion but also provides strategies for making it possible to improve organisation and accomplishment of group work reports (Ashman & Gillies, 1997; Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

Assessment of group work

Even though the students claim that assessment is a fairly important aspect in group work (Table 3), it is obvious that the students mostly do not know if they are being assessed at all. Students lack understandable and transparent rules for assessment and marking.

Transparency. The students seem to worry about being assessed. Are they being assessed as individuals or as a group? Is the teacher's assessment based on the work process or on the outcome (e.g. the report)?

Furthermore, the students do not know if there is any criteria for the assessments. The students lack written evaluations in connection with the report as well as feedback for possible improvement of future group work.

The answers indicate a wish to be assessed in a way that can help the students improve. The informants also want to be given a positive oral evaluation directly after the oral presentation since written assessments might contain more negative aspects and should be given individually.

Summing up. The students make a strong point of the importance of transparency; when it comes to assessment, they want to know beforehand how the teacher is going to assess the individuals and the group work.

Research confirming the students' opinions about assessment of group work

Previous studies in this research area have shown that feedback and rewards are highly relevant factors when organising group work (Hammar Chiriac, 2010a; Steiner, 1972, 1976; Underwood, 2003). Webb (1997) suggests that there are different and identifiable reasons for assessing students' group work.

Transparency. Even though different ways of assessing are available, the fundamental issue may not be whether the actual reward system promotes individual performance or a group product but what the students believe they are rewarded for. Group rewards can result in the group members working together “as a group,” for example, collaboration in a joint and planned task during an allotted period of time. If, on the other hand, the students believe that they are rewarded individually, this can encourage “in a group,” for example working side by side on individual tasks in a group context. It is also commonly known that valuable rewards are more desirable than insignificant payoffs. Furthermore, research has shown (Webb, 2008) that it is important that the reward system matches the group's assignment. In terms of this study, if teachers want students to perform in a certain way (for instance, collaborate) or produce the final group product in a special way, the assessment procedures must impose this activity on them. If a teacher wants a group to collaborate, this must be one of the assessment criteria to be rewarded. One way to encourage collaboration, as well as individual contributions, is to use assessment procedures that evaluate the complete task but also stress individual accountability (Webb, 1997; Postholm, 2008). Equally important, and perhaps even the most important aspect, is to enlighten the students about the criteria for assessments (Jaques, 2000; Webb, 2008). The teacher needs to make the assessment explicit and express the goals to the students in a clear and transparent way so that the students are fully aware of whether they are being assessed and, if so, what is being assessed.

Thus, school researchers and the students are in accordance that it is important that the goals and the assessment of group work are in agreement and that the procedures are made explicit to the student.

The role of the teacher in group work

The teacher is the last, but not least, of the six important aspects emerging from the focus groups. The results show that the teacher plays an important role in the realisation and outcome of group work. Two crucial “teacher duties” have been identified, namely the teacher as “arranger” and as “supporter.”

The teacher as an arranger. The students expect the teacher to organise the frames of the group work. This includes arranging a context and giving tools that promote cooperation. Failing to structure appropriate arrangements may have a negative impact on the group's ability to cooperate or to work in a group at all.

The students also emphasise that the teachers need to have the situation under control, which includes both the context and the students involved in the group activities.

The teacher as a supporter. The teacher's wholehearted support is the be-all and end-all of a successful process and outcome of group work. The teacher needs to be attentive and must not abandon the students during their work. If the students perceive a lack of interest by the

teacher or if the teacher leaves the students to sort out problems by themselves, they lose interest in the task.

To sum up. The students are very clear that they want a teacher that organises sharp frames of the group work and they want a teacher that is present for consultation during the whole work.

Research confirming the students' opinions about the role of teacher in group work

The teacher as an arranger. In a series of studies, Huber, Sorrentino, Davidson, Eppler, and Roth (1992) found that group work is most effective when the teacher presents clearly structured situations, including guidelines. This means that the importance of the teacher cannot be neglected. Peterson and Miller (2004) studied groups engaged in collaborative learning. One conclusion from their study was that teachers should focus their attention on designing reasonably challenging tasks that help students to reach their goals and ensure that students have the necessary skills to succeed in their tasks. Howe et al. (2007) stress that the teacher's role is as an arranger and supporter, rather than a controller. Johnson and Johnson (2008) found that when the teacher specified that cooperative skills were to be used and observed and gave feedback on how well participants were using their skills, the group performed better than without such processing.

The teacher as a supporter. Gillies (2008) concludes that "the mediated-learning interactions that the teachers used were designed to not only scaffold students' learning but also prompt meaningful cognitive and metacognitive thinking about their problem-solving activities" (p. 260). Such content was found to challenge the students' thinking and encourage their work. She also found that when teachers, as supporters of group work, used mediated-learning behaviours, it resulted in a sequence of reciprocal interaction between teacher and students (Gillies, 2004). This type of interaction stimulated the students and their problem-solving strategies. It is obvious that recent research lends support to the informants' assumption that the role of the teacher needs to be attentive, supportive, interactive, and clarifying.

Students' opinions versus scientific research

The above presentation reveals that almost all of the statements put forward by the students concerning prerequisites for a successful group work are confirmed by educational research. Certainly, this does not imply that the students have grasped the secret of a successful group work or that educational research has got the solution for high-quality group work. The teacher, who is the organiser with respect to the aspects listed in this study, holds the key position, in this concern. This basic condition will be elucidated in the concluding section.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this study, we have accounted for students' opinions about what constitutes a high- or low-qualitative group work. According to their statements, six main reasons could be discerned. The aspect that seems to be most important is the role of the teacher. The other five points concern the frames and the prerequisites created by the teacher. The crucial point deals with the teacher's attitude during the group's work. The students want the teacher's wholehearted support during a group work session. The teacher must not abandon the students during their work. If the teacher shows a lack of interest in the students, they will, in turn, lose interest in the task. The students want the teacher to be present in order to answer questions but also to support groups that have problems in getting started. The teacher must also be prepared to intervene when a conflict arises in a group.

The students' reports have to be interpreted, as they absolutely do not want laissez-faire leadership but neither authoritarian leadership. Rather, they describe a democratic form of leadership, which implies that the teacher has to "read" the group's needs and be accessible for consultation. They definitely do not want a teacher who corrects tests or homework or prepares other lessons while the students are working in groups. The physical and mental presence of the teacher seems to be of very great importance to the students.

Classroom management is the key to successful group work. When it comes to organisation, the teacher's task is to decide on group size and group composition and the suitable location of the groups. The teachers have to prepare the students for how to work in group settings, which means training the students in how to plan and communicate in a group situation.

Teachers need to present comprehensible, clearly defined, and interesting problems. They also need to train the students in how to give an account of their work and how to mediate their knowledge to their classmates. Rules for assessment and grading need to be transparent and given to the students beforehand. The teacher also needs to be present and available to the student during the course of their work.

The conclusions presented above are in line with Lotan's (2006, 2008) overview of managing group work in the heterogeneous classroom. "Skillful management of group work requires that (...) [teachers] understand the connections among the fundamental components of teaching and learning" (p. 528). Thus, the teacher's instructional approach seems to be a cornerstone of group work in the classroom.

In summary. One could say that the teacher's responsibility for the aspects described here is unconditional. The arrangement of group work in the classroom is, to a high degree, a question of educational leadership.

Teachers have told us that they have tried group work but then abandoned this form of working as they felt that it did not work. In their opinion, the students took no responsibility and did not learn enough. Actually, the teachers have probably not tried out group work at all, there is more likely, they have supported individual work in a group constellation, for example, having the students work *in* a group instead of *as* a group. Research has shown (Galton & Williamson, 1992; Granström, 2006) that a very frequent form of "group work" is that the students divide the task into small parts, and then each of them writes a text about his or her part. The different pieces are then stapled together and presented as the result of group work. In practice, this is just individual work, which makes very little use of the group as a forum for mutual learning. This, in turn, can be explained by the mode of introducing the task and the training given to the students concerning how to collaborate in a group situation.

The consequences of this study are important and constitute a challenge to teachers and their leadership. It is obvious that all six aspects with relevance to good group work have to be dealt with by the teacher in an appropriate way. (a) The teacher has to decide on group size, compose groups, allot time, and guarantee a calm location. (b) The teacher needs to train the students in the mode of working in groups, which means regular training in group work. (c) The teacher has to give understandable tasks in group work and (d) train the students to report group work. (e) The assessment of group work needs to be formulated beforehand as regards to form and content. (f) The role of the teacher in group work has to be that of an arranger, and during the course of the group work, the teacher needs to be a supporter. The teacher must not leave the students to their own devices when it comes to forming the work of the group.

This is not a pedagogical or a democratic approach; it is just abandoning the students and giving up the role of a responsible teacher.

It is obvious that the six aspects all related to teachers' leadership and accounted for in this study need to be further scrutinised, as they seem to be crucial for attaining high-quality group work.

The originality of this research is three folded. First, it discloses what students consider as important requisites for a successful group work. Their inside knowledge about classroom activities end up in a list (a taxonomy) of crucial conditions for high-quality group work. Second, the conditions mentioned by the students have all been confirmed by recent scientific research. Thus, thirdly, the present study may provide teachers with evidence-based knowledge about successful group work.

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TABLES

Table 1.
Description of participants

Focus group	Participants Fe/M	Time (min)
U-school	4 / 3	40
U-school	2 / 6	36
P-school	3 / 3	35
P-school	3 / 3	38
K-school	6 / 2	42
K-school	3 / 3	41

Table 2.

Different modes of working together in the classroom, according to the students

Aspects	Collaboration	Cooperation
Method	Work together	Help each other
Content	A common task	Individual task
Time	Planned Assigned time	Spontaneous Occasionally

Table 3

Aspects and subcategories promoting and inhibiting high-quality group work,

ASPECTS/ Subcategories	Promoting collaboration	Inhibiting collaboration
ORGANISATION		
• Group size	2-5 students	More than 6 students
• Group composition	Not too heterogeneous	Too heterogeneous
• Time	Suited to task	Too little time
• Location	Calm	Noisy
MODE OF WORKING		
• Focus	In the task	In other things
• Participation	All members	Some members
TASK		
• Intelligible	Comprehensible	Incomprehensible
• Stimulating	Interesting	Boring
REPORT		
• Content	Understandable	Messy
• Performance	Lively	Hard to follow
• Responsibility	All group members	Only a few members
ASSESSMENT		
• Transparency	Known criteria	Hidden or no criteria
ROLE OF THE TEACHER		
• Arranger	Promotes cooperation	Fails to structure
• Supporter	Being present	Abandoning the students