



Indicator: All teachers encourage peer interaction. (4428)

Explanation: Research endorsed best instructional practice includes peer interaction that promotes language, cognitive and social development. Certain aspects of learning occur best and cement learning through mutual discovery with one's peers or classmates. Important skills like negotiation, persuasion, conflict resolution, and argumentation can be learned from one's classmates. In addition, peer interaction in small group settings can build student self-esteem, self-concept and identity.

Questions: What evidence will the principal seek to determine all teachers provide a multitude of opportunities for peer interaction? What processes do all teachers use to implement a variety of small group learning settings such as a teacher led small group, a student led small group and/or student pairs?

Teacher Reticence about Peer Interactions in the Classroom

In a traditional classroom, the teacher spends the majority of the class period instructing while students sit quietly in rows and listen (Montague & Rinaldi, 2001). When students get time for seatwork, to practice the skills they just learned, they are encouraged to work independently. In this hierarchical structure, there are few, if any, opportunities for students to collaborate and interact in a productive way.

Even when they are seated at tables or in groups, students are told not to talk or work together. Interactions between students are not valued and are assumed to be counterproductive. Classrooms of this type provide neither meaningful opportunities for peer interaction and collaboration, nor the preparation to positively work with others should those opportunities arise (Blatchford, et al., 2003). Often, the only opportunities students have to cooperate are during extracurricular activities (Johnson, 1981).

While popular opinion among teachers is changing about the nature of collaborative work, many teachers enforce this authoritative structure to maintain control and to keep students from getting distracted. In addition to behavior management concerns, many teachers do not feel that students can truly learn in collaborative settings or that group work merely allows the higher-achieving students to tutor their peers (Blatchford, et al., 2003). Johnson (1981) even refers to a phenomenon of "adult centrism" in schools, (p. 5) a continual focus on the relationships with and actions of adults towards children instead of the relationships between students.

Benefits of Peer Interactions

Johnson (1981) asserts that this undue focus on adult-student relationships and interactions in schools has caused the devaluing of student-student interactions, although research has shown that they are often the most important relationships that students develop in school. Not only are educators responsible for academic learning, but they must also facilitate: "socializing children and adolescents into the perspectives, values, and attitudes they need to

function effectively within our society; and facilitating the cognitive, social, and physical development of each individual student” (Johnson, 1981, p. 5).

This is not only an ideal of comprehensive education, but peer interactions can have a significant impact on students’ feelings about, experiences with, and motivation for school. Ladd (1990) studied children throughout their kindergarten year and found that the degree to which children received support and friendship from their classmates was strongly related to their ability to adjust to school in a happy and healthy way. Children who felt rejected by or isolated from their peers often had reduced “interest, involvement, and performance in school” as well as having emotional needs remaining unmet” (p. 1083). The effects from children’s foundational year of schooling can continue to impact students and their outcomes as they progress through their educational career.

On the contrary, children who made friends in kindergarten felt more comfortable and supported in their learning environment and did better academically (Ladd, 1990). Similarly, Johnson (1981) found that students who had opportunities for collaborative peer interactions in the classroom expressed more positive views of school and their teacher than students who were not able to interact with peers. It is well within a teacher’s control to foster this type of cooperative environment by creating structures and routines for productive and positive interactions; as a result of the teacher taking this step, students will have more opportunities develop healthy social skills and build peer relationships (Johnson, 1981).

How Teachers Can Foster Positive and Effective Peer Interactions

Teachers must think carefully about how they facilitate opportunities for collaboration in their classrooms, but they also need to be mindful of how their own interactions with students influence others. Montague and Rinaldi (2001) found that the “tone of teacher interactions with students contribute to peer acceptance or rejection” (p. 76). This effect is especially acute for students with behavior problems, who are already at risk of rejection from their peers and negative school outcomes.

It is also important for teachers to plan ahead for student collaboration. Blatchford, et al. (2003) write that while teachers often plan for how their “time with students,

but not between students” will be spent (p. 2). Luckily for teachers adapting their instructional methods to include more peer grouping, there are a variety of simple ways to incorporate peer interactions into the classroom. Rosenshine (2012) discusses a number of ways that students can work together, for the purposes of both learning new material and reviewing content that was previously covered. Some of the least intrusive ways to incorporate peer interactions include: having students share their thoughts or responses with a seat partner or neighbor, creating classroom systems to have students respond to or agree with other students’ responses, facilitating student study groups, or encouraging peer tutoring (Rosenshine, 2012). When putting together student groups, Redding (2006) emphasizes their fluid and temporary nature, as the students in each group should be selected based on their ability with a particular skill; groups for other skills or lessons will be arranged differently, in order to avoid any stigmas or labeling of students.

King (1990) highlights the strategy of reciprocal peer questioning, in which students are trained to ask and answer higher level questions and are then put into groups to question each other about the story or course content they have learned. This technique helped students better understand the perspectives of their peers and pushed them to think critically. King found that students who were able to build this shared responsibility of co-learning performed better on subsequent assessments than those who had worked independently. For younger students or those who might need additional support, King (1990) suggested that teachers provide question stems or other structural supports to help students guide their own conversations.

Bossert (1988) and Peterson and Taylor (2012) discuss the importance of these structural supports in helping students learn to work collaboratively. They both discuss the idea of “task interdependence,” in which different roles are assigned to each of the students in collaborative groups, to help them take responsibility for a necessary piece of the assignment. Examples of student roles include being a timekeeper, writer, or discussion leader, and these can change depending on the content or project. However, delineating these roles for students helps to engage those who may not typically participate, creates a sense of purpose and value for each student, and

can help keep students focused and motivated. Peterson and Taylor (2012) also encourage the setting of group work norms, including making eye contact and having every group member participate, to ensure that student interactions are positive and productive.

Even for teachers who may be hesitant to have students collaborate in the classroom, there are a variety of ways to subtly and easily have students interact in meaningful ways. As students learn to work together productively and work through conflicts respectfully, teachers may increase their own comfort level with peer interactions to facilitate learning.

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