

## WORK IN SMALL GROUPS - THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper discusses a current issue related to group work when training teachers. In this relation, it clarifies the essence of basic concepts which are directly related to the topic on this problem, namely group work with the focus on working in small groups. When discussing those, concrete examples are used in order to give a clearer and more complete view of their specifics and application. The paper focuses on the specifics and the work in small groups and their effectiveness when forming different knowledge and skills related to the subject. The methods of creating groups are clarified, as well as the specific features and rules of how to work in small group. When working in a small group, the participants acquire specific skills (linguistic, intellectual, social, etc.): to communicate, for effective speaking and listening, for discussing, analysing, summarising, systematising, presenting arguments, participating in disputes, to negotiate, for producing multiple ideas, analysing and finding evidences to support theses, etc. All those allow it to find a quicker and optimum solution to the problems raised and help achieve greater efficiency in the overall training process.

In order to better clarify the topic of the opportunities and benefits of working in groups, an example is given presenting how to form knowledge and skills in a small group when training teachers on the topic of "Diagnostic Activity of the Teacher". In this material, an example of inquiry card is presented as one of most common diagnostic tools. The task that teachers have to accomplish while divided in small groups is to develop an inquiry card which includes 10 closed-type questions on a current issue (of their choice) in order to identify the opinion and the attitude of the respondents on the selected issues.

**Keywords:** group work, work in small groups

### РАБОТА В МАЛКИ ГРУПИ - ТЕОРЕТИКО-МЕТОДИЧЕСКИ АСПЕКТИ

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**РЕЗЮМЕ.** В настоящия материал се разглежда един актуален въпрос, свързан с групова работата при обучение на учители. В тази връзка се изяснява същността на основни понятия, пряко свързани с темата на разработката, а именно: груповата работа и се акцентира на работа в малки групи. При тяхното изясняване са използвани и конкретни примери за по-голяма яснота и пълнота относно тяхната специфика и приложение. В материала се акцентира върху спецификата и работата в малки групи и тяхната ефективност за формиране на различни знания и умения, свързани с темата. Изясняват се начините на формиране на групи, характерните особености и правила за работа в малка група. При работа в малки групи участниците придобиват различни умения (лингвистични, интелектуални, социални и др.): комуникативни, ефективно говорене и ефективно слушане, дискутиране, анализиране, обобщаване, систематизиране, аргументиране, водене на спорове, умения за преговаряне, продуциране на множество идеи, анализиране и намиране на доказателства в подкрепа на твърдения и др. Всичко това позволява по-бързо и оптимално решение на поставените проблеми и спомага за по-голяма ефективност в цялостния обучителен процес.

За по-пълно изясняване на въпроса за възможностите и ползите от работа в групи, е представен примерен вариант за формиране на знания и умения в малка група при обучение на учители по тема „Диагностичната дейност на учителя“. В конкретния материал е представен примерен вариант на анкетна карта – като един от често използваните инструменти за диагностична дейност. Задачата, която учителите трябва да изпълнят, разделени в малки групи, е да разработят анкетна карта, която да включва 10 въпроса от закрит тип по актуален проблем (по техен избор) с цел да установят мнението и отношението на респондентите по избраната проблематика.

**Ключови думи:** групова работа, работа в малки групи

### Introduction

In the contemporary literature on didactics and methods of teaching, the issue of group work is discussed in various publications. The methodical practice shows that working in small groups is effective. (6) One of the definitions for a group is "a union of persons, events, based on a common feature" (Burov et al., 1994).

The group system of education is not a new one. It was applied even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the ecclesiastical and knight's schools, and later in the common village schools. In the meantime, it was developed and refined (4).

The possibility for working in groups and to solve effectively various problems – this is a virtue that is priced vaguely by the employers. In this kind of format, there are various benefits which can be described in the following way:

- broadening the knowledge of the participations in the group;
- formation of knowledge for contributions, communicative skills, etc.;
- skills for discussion;
- attaining an individual and group responsibility;

- exchange of ideas and thoughts;
- formation of a group behaviour;
- exchange of information;
- determination of roles and responsibilities;
- confirmation of ideas;
- formation of common conclusions, etc.

The practice of educational programs for teachers shows that working within a small group (4-6 persons) is more effective. It suggests more possibilities for cooperation and for adoption of many new ideas (2)

Pedagogical practice shows the efficacy of education when working in a group. Educating people in that way and with the aid of various interactive methods provides the opportunity to reach the proper decision and to extend their knowledge in a given area.

### **Main characteristics of working in a group**

The practice shows that education of teachers is more effective when part of the time is dedicated to the implementation of concrete task and the participants are divided into small groups. The number of the participants in the group depends on various subjective and objective factors. In the specialised literature there are various opinions about the number of the participants. In practice, the so-called "small group" consists of 3-6 participants. The optimum group is formed of 4 participants. It is recommended to work with groups that are approximately equal.

Work in a small group is more effective especially in the occasion when the main decisions are made, or important conclusions on a particular problem are made. Work in a small group is a contemporary interactive method which has a broader application in the education programs for teachers.

There are two forms of group participation:

- all groups work on one theme or item;
- every group discusses different topics or investigates similar topics from a different perspective. (3)

### **Formation of the groups**

It may be performed in various ways:

- accidentally;
- based on common interest (in this way, the group will work on a small unit);
- based on sex, age, knowledge, etc.

When working in small groups, the participant will attain various skills (linguistic, intellectual, social, etc.):

- communicative;
- for effective speaking and effective listening;
- for discussing, analysing, systematising, argumentation;

- for contesting and presenting arguments;
- for producing and sharing ideas;
- analysing and finding argumentation, etc.

All this allows faster and accurate solution to the problems and helps come to a more effectively solution in the whole educational process.

In the process of working in a group, there is a possibility of a conflict. For resolving this conflict, it is necessary for all the participants to analyse the conflict situation and to determine the objective and subjective factors that caused the conflict. Based on this, a decision must be found for resolving the conflict situation and a consensus must be reached based on the appropriate methods and skills.

### **Characteristic features in working in a small group**

They may be described as follows:

- It allows intensive communion;
- Every participant has the possibility to show themselves in a new role;
- Every participant has the possibility to enrich and to experiment new roles (that of an instance leader, a mediator, etc.);
- It stimulates research, investigation, the formation of new ideas for the sake of common aim which creates the feeling of nearness and mutual dependence on the members of the group;
- It helps generate, procure, and estimate ideas and their implementation.

All of the above bring about a more effective education with an accent on the role of the educating person who is in the "centre" of the educational process.

### **Main rules for working in a small group**

These are as follows:

- free and constructive explanation of the feelings and the problems;
- avoidance of esteems in the process of working;
- working of a specific problem;
- taking responsibility for self-conduct;
- free explanation of self-opinion on the issues discussed in front of all participants in the group;
- responsibility for the self-auctions, behaving according to group norms and with self-responsibility;
- attaining the inviolability of the person without disregarding the other participants;
- assertive behaviour on the part of the leader and control for attaining the self-inviolability of the participants;
- offering and taking support when needed;
- parity of the participants, i.e. equal possibilities of all members of the group;
- participating in a constructive dialogue and displaying openness in the process of mutual work;
- effective participation. (5)

### Variant of a practical application of work in a small group

For a better explanation of the issue of the opportunities and use of working in groups, an example variant is shown of the formation of knowledge and skills in a small group when educating teachers on the topic of "Diagnostic activity of the teacher".

The main **knowledge** which the teachers must attain when realising that educational program are connected with the specifics of the diagnostic activity:

- diagnostic;
- diagnostic procedure;
- diagnostic methods;
- diagnostic tools (inquiry, test).

The main **skill** in a practical aspect is to be able to perform diagnostics in their direct work as teachers both in the "input" (as current trainees) and in the "output" (in the education of their own students).

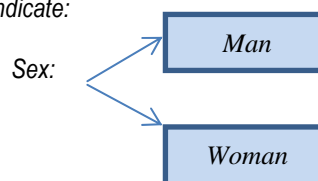
One of the main skills to attain is for the teacher to learn, develop, and use diagnostic tools. The educational program is a practical activity for resolving tasks on that issue by the aid of working in small groups. The participants are divided into groups. As usual, this is attained in accordance to the principle of common interests and subject that is taught. This way, the group may perform as a very good team. In the periods that are allocated for attaining diagnostic tools in a theoretical aspect, attention is given to the test and the questionnaire. The tasks which must be performed in groups are related to these. For instance, when the educator presents and clarifies the essence of the questionnaire, the types of questionnaires, the requirements to the questions and answers, the structuring, the type of layout, etc. and presents an example of an inquiry, the participants are divided into small groups and work on the same task. The example of an investigating card which aims to establish the opinion and the relation to the visualisation of the information is as follows:

*With this investigation, we wish to establish your opinion on the issue of the usefulness of the information. With respect to this, you should underline the answer that is most suitable to your opinion.*

No	Question/Affirmative statement	Response
1	Do you think that the visualisation of information helps its adoption?	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
2	The visualisation of information enhances the learning process.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
3	The visualisation of information increases the interest in the problem that is examined.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No

4	The visualisation enhances the activity of the person who is taught.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
5.	The visualisation of information enhances the activity of the teacher/ lecturer.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
6	The visualisation supports the development of skills for selecting information.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
7	The visualisation develops skills for the analysis and synthesis of information.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
8	The visualisation develops a closer connection with the practice, with real situations in life.	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
9	Do you often visualise the information that you present?	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No
10	Should the visualisation of information be supported by a discussion on the topic?	Yes Maybe – yes Maybe – no No

Please indicate:



We thank you in advance for the time spared.

The task that is applied by the teachers who are divided into small group is as follows:

1. **Choose the actual topic on** and investigate the opinion **on** and **the attitude to this topic** of a task group **(by choice)**.
2. **Formulate 10 questions/statements** (closed type) **through** which to investigate the opinion of the task group **on the issue discussed**.
3. **Prepare the card according** to the requirements.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to point out that working in a small group is a successful interactive method for training teachers, but it is not necessarily to be absolutised. The application of this method and its efficacy depend on various objective and subjective factors which must be taken into account.

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