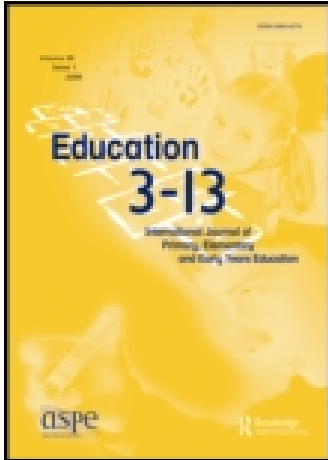


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## Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rett20>

### The challenges of implementing group work in primary school classrooms and including pupils with special educational needs

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Published online: 24 Sep 2014.



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To cite this article: Ed Baines, Peter Blatchford & Rob Webster (2015) The challenges of implementing group work in primary school classrooms and including pupils with special educational needs, *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 43:1, 15-29, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2015.961689](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.961689)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.961689>

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## The challenges of implementing group work in primary school classrooms and including pupils with special educational needs

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*(Received 10 January 2014; accepted 14 May 2014)*

Findings from two studies are discussed in relation to the experiences and challenges faced by teachers trying to implement effective group work in schools and classrooms and to reflect on the lessons learnt about how to involve pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The first study reports on UK primary school teachers' experiences of implementing a year-long intervention designed to improve the effectiveness of pupils' collaborative group-working in classrooms (the SPRinG [Social Pedagogic Research into Group-work] project). The second study (the MAST [Making a Statement] project) involved systematic observations of 48 pupils with SEN (and comparison pupils) and case studies undertaken in the context of primary school classrooms.

**Keywords:** collaborative group work; Special Educational Needs; primary schools; social skills

### Introduction

There is now a wealth of research on cooperative and collaborative group work that provides persuasive evidence that these approaches are effective in promoting academic attainment, conceptual understanding, pro-social and pro-learning attitudes and communication and social skills (see Lou et al. 1996; Webb and Palincsar 1996; Slavin, Hurley, and Chamberlain 2003). However, much of this experimental research is based on small-scale, short-term studies that are specifically designed and which rarely involve teachers developing and implementing group-work strategies in the everyday context of their own classrooms. Despite this evidence, classroom-based descriptive research has shown that whole-class teaching and independent work are the dominant learning contexts and that group work is relatively rare (Galton, Simon, and Croll 1980; Galton et al. 1999; Kutnick, Blatchford, and Baines 2002; Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick 2003). These studies suggest that within the majority of primary classrooms, children sit *in* groups, but rarely work together *as* groups. Further evidence suggests that when peer interaction takes place, it is often of low quality (e.g. children may be told to work together – but interactions involve little more than the sharing of answers).

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A number of studies have identified resistances to the use of group work (see Baines, Blatchford, and Chowne 2007; Gillies and Boyle 2010). Main concerns amongst teachers are that group work will interrupt or lead to slow coverage of the curriculum; that it will involve the loss of control, increased noise, disruption and off-task behaviour; and beliefs that children cannot work together and are unable to learn from one another or that it is only the more able that can benefit from group work. Many teachers feel that they do group work already whilst also expressing disappointment about its limited value. Students can also be reluctant to get involved in group work because of concerns about teacher expectations and getting the wrong answer (Galton et al. 1999) or because of the possible negative impact on peer relations.

The SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Group Work) research was set up to address these difficulties and resistances to group work. It was also designed to move beyond the limitations of experimental evidence on group work by enabling teachers to use group work under everyday classroom conditions, across the school curriculum and whole-school day. It was a five-year-long project that had two main aims: first, to develop and implement with teachers a programme of principles and activities that incorporated group work into curriculum and everyday school activities (phases one and two); and, second, to evaluate this programme relative to a control group in terms of academic progress, behavioural interaction and dialogue, and attitudes and motivation towards learning (phase three). The overall study covered pupils aged 5–14 years (see Galton et al. 2009; Kutnick and Blatchford 2013). In this paper, we concentrate on research on children between 7 and 11 years (known as Key Stage 2 (KS2)).

The resulting programme consisted of a handbook (Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick 2009) and six training meetings which enabled teachers to develop the skills to use group work across the curriculum. The handbook combined a set of principles and practices along with group skill training activities for pupils that also helped teachers to understand and apply the principles and practices. It aimed to address teachers' and pupils' concerns about group work.

The key principles and recommended practices covered four main areas (see Baines, Blatchford, and Chowne 2007; Kutnick and Blatchford 2013).

- (1) Preparing the classroom and group context for group work. This involves arranging the classroom to maximise the potential for group work by thinking about classroom layout, the composition, and size and stability of groups.
- (2) Preparing lessons and group-work activities. This involves ensuring that group-work tasks are challenging and warrant group interactions of a high level and involve the application and synthesis of knowledge.
- (3) Preparing adults to support pupils and groups. Teachers need to support the groups' ability to do the task rather than directing them on how to do the task through the use of monitoring, guiding (e.g. by asking open-ended questions and offering suggestions), modelling and reinforcing and through coaching.
- (4) Preparing pupils for group work. Children do not automatically develop group-working skills and they need to be supported through a 'relational approach' where children feel safe to participate, to ask questions, to discuss problems and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Findings from the evaluation phase of the research were impressive: they showed that relative to a control sample, KS2 SPRinG pupils made greater progress in general science tests at the end of the year. They also made greater progress in specific science lessons that had

made extended use of the SPRinG group work. We also found through systematic observation that during group work, SPRinG pupils were more actively engaged in task interactions, were engaged in more sustained interactions and engaged in more high-level reasoning talk (see Blatchford et al. 2006; Baines, Blatchford, and Chowne 2007).

Although these findings represent solid evidence of the benefit of the intervention on pupils, and indicates some overcoming of the resistances to group work identified earlier, informal reports from teachers suggested that a number of challenges remained. These were made most pressing in the case of pupils with Special Education Needs and the difficulties some teachers and pupils experienced during the implementation of group work. We were also interested in finding out how best to enable whole schools to take on group-working practices and to enable a mutually supportive environment for teachers to implement group-work strategies. This fourth phase of the research therefore aimed to examine the experiences and views of school staff involved in implementing the SPRinG programme within their school and classrooms (see Baines 2013). This research provided insights into the challenges of implementing the programme, not revealed by the earlier quantitative results.

The paper brings together findings from this fourth phase of the SPRinG project with relevant results from a second project, the Making a Statement (MAST) project, which involved systematic observations and case studies of children with a statement<sup>1</sup> of Special Educational Needs (SEN) educated in mainstream classroom settings (see Webster and Blatchford 2013a, 2013b). The MAST study was prompted by findings from a large-scale research project on the use and impact of teaching assistants (TAs) which found that pupils with high-level SEN who received high amounts of support from and interaction with TAs had a qualitatively different educational experience from that of their peers (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012). Despite substantial debate on the topic of inclusion, there is little systematic information on the interactions and supports experienced on an everyday basis by pupils with statements in mainstream settings. The main aim of the study was to examine the nature of everyday educational experiences for primary-aged pupils with a statement of SEN. The MAST study provided information on the frequency of interactions pupils with SEN experienced with peers and adults, and the locations and learning contexts within which these occurred. The data from this study provide insights into the opportunities pupils with SEN have for working together with peers in their classrooms.

Specific data from the SPRinG and MAST studies are complementary. The SPRinG study provided insights into the experiences of teachers implementing the programme, and in particular focusing on the challenges and difficulties that they had in the process. One specific tension throughout the research, as we shall see, was how best to involve pupils with SEN. The MAST study enabled a more naturalistic perspective on the extent to which children with SEN are included in mainstream classrooms and are able to participate in, and benefit from, ‘peer co-learning’ approaches (this term refers to all types of peer learning including cooperative and collaborative learning and peer helping and tutoring – where peers work together to undertake a task). It also offered insights into the factors affecting whether opportunities to work with peers were more or less likely. This paper outlines selected findings from the two studies, as they bear on the challenges involved in implementing peer co-learning. First, it seeks to examine the extent to which children with SEN have opportunities to sit with and interact with peers in everyday classroom contexts, and teachers’ views in relation to the SPRinG programme. It then considers possible strategies into what can be done to involve children with SEN in peer co-learning. The paper then moves on to consider the general challenges facing schools, teachers and

pupils when implementing a programme of collaborative learning in classrooms. The paper ends by identifying how the implementation of group work can be improved, and how, in particular, pupils with SEN can be meaningfully included within group work.

## **Method**

### ***The SPRinG project***

The SPRinG study involved the development with teachers of the collaborative group-work programme and then a systematic evaluation of this programme in relation to a control group. Full details of the study and methods used can be found in Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick (2008), Blatchford et al. (2006) and Kutnick and Blatchford (2013).

### *Data collection methods*

In the fourth year of the SPRinG research, after the evaluation phase of the study, we asked schools to implement the programme themselves. This was deliberately without the guidance of the research team, but within each school, there was a teacher who had been involved with the programme during the evaluation phase and had implemented group-work in their classrooms for one year. These ‘facilitators’ agreed to take the lead in working with and supporting colleagues to implement the ideas across the school and in classrooms. All schools received an initial input from a researcher and teacher facilitator at the start of the year which consisted of either an In Service Training afternoon or an extended staff meeting devoted to undertaking and planning for SPRinG implementation.

Teachers’ views and experiences were collected via semi-structured interviews at the end of the school year. The interviews were carried out with a sub-sample of 21 facilitators and teachers from seven schools. One group interview with three teachers and a senior member of staff took place due to time constraints and staff availability and there were two written accounts where teachers had not been available. In most cases, interviewees were female (18 out of 21 participants).

The majority of schools were multi-ethnic schools in London with high proportions of children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) (mean = 38%, SD = 19), children whose first language was not English (mean = 57%, SD = 34), and children identified as having a Special Educational Need but without a statement (mean = 28%, SD = 10) were higher than the national average.

Interview questions focused on views about the implementation of the programme across the school/Key Stage; their experiences of implementing the ideas into the fabric of the classroom; reflections on the SPRinG ideas and practices and thoughts on what had worked well and what had not worked so well.

### ***The MAST Project***

The research involved 48 pupils (9–10 years) drawn from 45 schools in two Local Authorities in the south of England, and four London boroughs. All pupils had a statement of SEN for either moderate learning difficulties (29) or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (14) with five having a more complex composition of difficulties relating to both areas. Three quarters of the pupils were boys and a quarter were girls and 46% received FSMs. The study also collected data on 151 average attaining pupils of the same gender drawn from the same classrooms to provide a group for comparison.

One of a small team of 15 researchers, trained in the MAST study research methodology, shadowed a pupil with a statement of SEN for a school week, collecting data using a multi-method approach that combined systematic observations of the pupil, with contextual data drawn from interviews with teachers, TAs and parents, and general qualitative observations drawn together into a detailed pupil-based case study.

The systematic observation schedule used was similar to that used in previous studies, including the SPRinG project, and involved a minute-by-minute description of behaviour, interaction and context over the five days. Pupils with SEN were observed for the first 10 seconds in every minute and comparison pupils were observed every fifth minute. This produced a data set of 38,865 data points totalling 648 hours of observation (564 hours for SEN pupils and 83 hours for comparison pupils). This large data set was analysed statistically. Researchers undertook two days of training along with field work practice and reliability (in terms of inter-observer agreement) was high. Full details of training, the methods used and the amount of data collected can be found in Webster and Blatchford (2013a).

Each case study report for the 48 pupils with statements of SEN provided a substantive picture of their educational experiences and covered the organisational factors at the school and classroom level that determined decision-making about provision, the nature and roles of teachers and TAs in this provision, and to what degree this differed from the provision in place for the majority of (non-SEN) pupils. The focus here is on the data from the systematic observations and selected examples from the interview data and from field notes.

## Results

Findings from the MAST study are presented first as they reflect the state of play in schools relative to the experiences of pupils with SEN to work together with peers. Results from the SPRinG project will then be presented since these elaborate on the issue relative to the implementation of the group-work programme and suggest some possible solutions.

### *MAST systematic observation data*

The MAST observational data provide important contextual information on the classroom experiences of pupils with SEN. They show that whilst average attaining pupils spent all of their time in class, pupils with a SEN spent over a quarter of their time (27%) outside of the classroom (and therefore 73% of their time in class).

Pupils in classrooms can exist in three main interactional contexts. They can work alone and thus not interact with peers or adults, they can work with an adult, possibly a teacher or a TA on a one-to-one basis or as part of a class or group, or they can work with and interact with peers. Findings showed that pupils with SEN were as likely as comparison pupils to work alone, but they were far more likely than comparison pupils to work and interact with an adult (see Table 1). They were less likely to interact with a teacher than comparison pupils (31% vs. 40%), and far more likely to interact with a TA (27% vs. 2%). In other data not shown in Table 1, it was found that interaction with a TA was during one-to-one interaction (19%) or as part of a group (6%) or class (2%). In contrast, interaction with a teacher was largely within a whole-class instructional context (23%) than a group or one-to-one (4% for each).

Of importance to this paper was the finding that pupils with SEN were half as likely to work with or alongside peers as pupils in the comparison group (18% vs. 32%).

Data on the nature of the grouping context provided further information on the contexts within which pupils with SEN work. As can be seen in Table 2, pupils without SEN were

Table 1. Systematic observation data for pupils with SEN and comparison pupils across the three classroom interactional contexts.

	Comparison		SEN	
Adult and target	42%	1770	58%	17,998
Teacher and target <sup>a</sup>	40%	1677	31%	9555
TA and target <sup>a</sup>	2%	93	27%	8443
Peer and target	32%	1361	18%	5510
No Interaction	26%	1102	24%	7274
Total	100%	4233	100%	30,782

<sup>a</sup>These data are a subset of the Adult and Target data.

Table 2. Systematic observation data relating to the attainment level of the group for pupils with SEN and comparison pupils when observed sitting in groups.

Group attainment	Comparison		SEN	
High	0.4%	11	1%	130
Medium	5%	135	2%	271
Low	5%	151	34%	5782
Mixed	89%	2524	63%	10,603
Total	100%	2821	100%	16,786

most likely to experience mixed attaining groups, yet pupils with SEN were less likely than comparison pupils to experience this setting. More importantly, just over a third of observations of pupils with SEN were of them sitting in low attaining groups, though of course, not necessarily engaged in team working when in these groups.

These patterns may not be particularly surprising, given the range of grouping sizes that can take place in a classroom (e.g. anything from pairs up to the whole class). However, when only the data for small groups of two to six pupils are considered, the picture becomes even more extreme. The comparison group of typical pupils were observed to experience mixed attainment small groups 80% of the time, whilst pupils with SEN experienced them for only 42% of the time. Most importantly, pupils with SEN were observed in low attainment small groups for 57% of the time and comparison pupils only 8% of the time. This highlights the absence of opportunities for pupils with SEN to be able to engage with medium and high attaining peers when learning in mainstream settings.

### ***Results from the MAST case studies***

The MAST case studies provide further information on the classroom contexts and dynamics that underpin and help explain the systematic observation results.

#### *Social isolation*

The interview and field note data provided evidence of a separation of the pupils with SEN from the rest of the class.

Pupil 124 seemed to be very socially isolated. She chose to sit alone or away from peers in whole class sessions. When paired with talking partners she was very rarely seen interacting. She was seen keeping herself away from peers.



In other cases, peers were reported to be frightened of, or reluctant to work with, the child with SENs.

Pupil 122 is very socially isolated within school. As a result of his behaviour, peers are wary of him and were seen actively keeping their distance and asking not to have to work with him.

TA L explained that the other members of the class may be reticent to work with Pupil 19 because he can rely very heavily upon them to successfully complete tasks, ‘he is hard to work with; isn’t forthcoming with ideas – so they know if they do work with him they’re going to have to do a lot of work themselves. It is a tricky thing, and it is part and parcel of [Pupil 19’s] needs ...’

Possible reasons for this social isolation include poor social and or communication skills on the part of the pupil with SEN which included: withdrawn or shy behaviour, a dominant, aggressive or confrontational manner, or inappropriate or odd behaviour possibly targeted at trying to improve relations with peers (e.g. overly familiar, affectionate behaviour). Also being at a lower level of attainment in comparison to peers meant that it was difficult for them to engage with peers on tasks set for the class.

But it would be dangerous to attribute the difficulties faced by a number of the target pupils with peer relations to intrinsic qualities of the pupils themselves. One key reason for the relative social disconnect was because of the decisions made about where the child is positioned in the classroom, the extent of interactions with adults, time in and out of the classroom and the general approach to working with the class as a whole and children with SEN.

#### *Peer interaction avoided/discouraged*

Interaction with peers might be deliberately reduced because of a perception that the pupil with SEN has problems with peers, and will not benefit from it or that this disrupts the rest of the class or that mainstream peers will miss out on learning and will suffer as a result. This might mean isolating the child or allowing him/her to opt out.

All staff were concerned that Pupil 16 was having a negative impact on other members of the class. The TA and SENCO talked about the workstation keeping him busy and stopping him ‘disturbing anybody’.

For Pupil 121 peer support was not in use or considered appropriate due to P121’s past difficulties working with peers and history of violence/arguments with peers. And: P121 was also allowed to withdraw from group-work to work alone in class when he found it difficult to work with others. Sometimes this was suggested to him by TAs.

There were also concerns about preventing the rest of the class learning.

Teacher A explained that she chose not to partner Pupil 16 with the same children all the time ‘because they are very, very good with him, but it also means they are forever explaining back down to [P16] rather than achieving themselves’. TA L echoed this sentiment saying ‘He’d be more of a hindrance to other children sometimes’.

#### *TA proximity restricting opportunities with peers*

The systematic observation and case study data are very consistent in showing that a main factor connected to the reduced interactions that target pupils had with other pupils in the

class is the tendency for pupils with SEN to be supported by adults, particularly TAs. It is, of course, understandable that schools choose to help pupils with statements by giving them more time with TAs, and in many statements, the extra help to be given to pupils is couched in terms of hours of TA support. But there are, as a result, bound to be implications for the general relationships such pupils have with other pupils. For example, the development of friendships and popularity are often based on proximity and opportunities to interact. Continued presence of a TA may also mean that the pupil with SEN becomes increasingly dependent on this support and thus is likely to become further separated from peers.

### *Social skills interventions*

Related to this are findings from the MAST study which showed the common strategy of seeking to improve a child's social skills is by involving them in individual or group interventions outside of the classroom, and the level of responsibility for this accorded to TAs. There are many social skills interventions and many of these involve concentrated or extended work with an individual child or small group of similarly needy children outside of the classroom. Elements of SEAL (a curriculum focusing on the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) require individual work or small group-work with other similar pupils that are conducted away from the classroom context (see Humphrey 2012). Other interventions and individual therapeutic work are also grounded in working only with the individual child and involve the provision of adult-led support. This is not to undervalue these interventions, but rather to suggest that class-based work is as important since this is the context where interactions with peers take place and it is about the development of relationships rather than just skills and reflecting on them. There is also a disconnect in the sense that these skills are worked on outside of the context of their use and leave the children to determine themselves how and whether to apply them once they get back into a classroom context. It appears that there is little strategic thinking about supporting these children's social skills within class.

### *Findings from SPRinG*

Data from the SPRinG project provided more specific information on the use of group-work and pupils with SEN. One might expect that implementing a programme like SPRinG would improve possibilities for children with SEN to engage with peers and there were some indications that this did occur (see Baines 2013). However, a number of teachers talked about the problems they experienced with involving students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in group-work. These difficulties involved rejection of the individual by the group as well as disruption caused within the group by the individual. One teacher reported about the difficulties she had had trying to include a child with SEN and discussed the different strategies that she had tried.

T3: I had a great deal of difficulty last year with B [during SPRinG evaluation phase]. Because absolutely no group wanted to have him because he spoilt every single activity you did, so he was never actually particularly in a group, where he could bond with them, to make much trust. I found it really difficult, and it didn't even help just having him watch a good group and try to pick up ideas that way, he could not apply it and this year I really tried hard not to swap people out of groups because the ones who managed to stay together without any interruptions tended to work better as the year's gone on. (4 teachers, School 4, P9)

Another teacher highlighted the effects that a troubled child with SEN had had on the rest of his group.

F: ... there was one group with one particularly difficult character, and I kept that character in the same group. Although most of the children had a very positive response to group-work, there were two children specifically in that group that didn't. I thought about moving him halfway through, and perhaps sharing the load in a sense. I think I should have done. I think sometimes it's about having flexibility. (Facilitator, School 5, P1–2)

### ***What can be done?***

#### *Deliberate strategies involving peer interaction*

The MAST data showed evidence, however, that in some classrooms, pupils with SEN were encouraged to interact and work with mainstream peers without SEN. These could involve the strategic placement of peers to sit near the pupil with SEN and to explicitly work with or support the child with SEN. Sometimes this extended to keeping certain peers away from the child with SEN to avoid arguments and disruption.

Observations and interviews with staff showed that pupils with SEN sometimes worked with peers, either as part of short discussions to input into a whole-class teaching exercise (e.g. talk partners) or as a piece of extended group-work.

Peer support was used in class with Pupil 18 in a mixed-attaining three rather than a pair for 'talking partners' so that she would be included but could also listen to peers.

Although positive, there were also concerns that pupils with SEN may become overly reliant on these peers and thus close attention was given to ensuring that the child with SEN can actively participate in these interactions.

The teacher explained to me that [Pupil 7] does have a good relationship with a peer but that there had been concern that he was becoming too reliant, allowing other students to do his work for him. As such she had started swapping talk partners weekly.

There was also evidence that peers received training in the support of a child with SEN.

Peer support was used with one year six boy providing a lot of peer support in encouraging P117 and building his confidence. This role had been suggested to him by the teachers but he had 'taken it on board' and become an important part of P117's support in the afternoons during foundation subjects.

TA L: They sometimes find it hard to involve [P19], because if they're in the top group they're quite happy to put forward their opinions – so we tend to just have a chat with them and say ... 'You need to include [P19]. Ask him questions and bring him in' and they're really good with doing that.

One quote from one case study highlights the importance of a positive approach and ethos of inclusion for really helping to include children with SEN and to support their needs.

Teacher A: The rest of the class are so supportive – I've never come across a more supportive, inclusive class. They are amazing. They would never laugh at him; they're really aware of everyone's different needs of each other, and they are fantastic ... within class you know

with teamwork, he just gets on with it and he just doesn't really notice that anything is different  
 ...

SENCO: His peers are really supportive of him – they know that he has difficulties with things, but they're very good at supporting him and often they'll say, 'Come on [P401], let's do it together'.

Non-SEN peers can also gain from such experiences, both at a level of social sensitivity and understanding and at a cognitive level. It is well established that when more able children help less able children to learn, the more able also benefit since the explanations and thinking required of them help firm up their knowledge (Webb and Palincsar 1996).

### *Further challenges identified in the SPRinG study*

There were further challenges identified by teachers involved in the SPRinG study, which, when handled well, teachers and classes implemented group-work and adapted to the new way of working, but when not handled well, led to a partial implementation of group-work. There were two main themes: school leadership and time, and, control and holding firm.

#### *School leadership and time*

According to teachers and facilitators, group-work was most effectively implemented across the whole school when there was a clear planned approach to implementation. This was particularly the case when senior management allowed time for facilitators and teachers to work together to plan the implementation of SPRinG ideas. This involved regular staff discussions during school staff meetings and when group-work was given particular space within curriculum planning meetings between staff. In some schools, time was made available for the facilitating teacher to talk through and model group training activities during planning meetings and in exceptional circumstances to work with other teachers in their classrooms to help them set up group-work and to provide feedback. As one teacher said:

T: What worked well?. I think the way it's been planned. It's needed somebody to give the information, to act as a reference and to be able to demonstrate. It's having someone who's confident; who understands the process and it's the whole timetabling of it that has worked very well. And I feel by putting it on a timetable, it's shown our commitment towards it. From the Head's ... profiling of it, 'this is really important, we're going to make it work' and having that from the start prevented any worries, panics of scheduling. (Teacher 1, School 6, P1)

Success of implementation was also enhanced when senior management enabled teachers to allot a weekly space in their timetables for SPRinG training activities. This enabled teachers and pupils to have a regular experience of SPRinG training which in turn supported the use of group-work in the curriculum. Allowing teachers to have this time and space made implementation easier. As one teacher reflected:

T: The school have got to have a massive commitment to it. That might mean dropping other things or ... , its freeing up of time. I think it needs to be a weekly slot. (Teacher 1, School 5 – P7)

#### *Control and 'holding firm'*

A number of teachers reported feeling uncertain about group-work because of the reduced sense of control they felt over what children did and learned. Group-work can bring a

perception of a greater distance between teacher and learner because the teacher is rarely present. This can lead to doubts about whether children are talking about the intended issues and a desire to engage in more direct teaching.

F: I think they [teachers] have to feel confident in the children; that the children can do it. A lot of teachers will feel that they want to control it. It is difficult to let go. Teachers, especially class teachers are in control, and they are guiding everything and I think that's the most difficult thing, letting go, letting your children do it. (Facilitator 1, School 4, P8–9)

Often teachers' concerns were to do with pupils' responses to undertaking group-work, and these were heightened in the case of pupils with difficulties and SEN. These reflected the reasons often given for not doing group-work, reported earlier (e.g. pupils lacking the skills to do group-work, that group-work leads to disruption). An experience that was widely reported by teachers, especially towards the start of implementing SPRinG ideas and often by new or less confident teachers, was of a 'hump' or period of difficulties that led them to feel unsure about the value of group-work. Teachers felt that this was brought on by early emotional tensions and arguments within groups. These teachers reported that if they held firm and continued to support children to resolve their differences themselves, through reflection, then such squabbles would quickly ease and productive group interactions would quickly follow. One teacher wrote about this part of the experience for a SPRinG newsletter.

F: Now came the difficult part. We watched and supported groups of children as they argued, shouted and sulked. We were very tempted to split them up, but the researchers said it was important that the children worked through these difficulties with adult support. For a long time all we could 'see' was noise and disruption. But after a while we realized that the noise we could hear was actually productive noise. They weren't arguing or talking [off task], they were actively engaged with the work. (Facilitator, School 7, SPRinG Newsletter)

Some teachers, possibly those lacking in confidence, quickly intervened to resolve the problems, for example, to split up the group or even stopping further use of group activities. These responses are understandable, but in order to overcome these barriers, pupils need to have time to adapt and reflect on such difficulties and to develop strategies for managing their feelings and frustrations. How teachers responded to these difficulties appears to be key in determining whether they continued with the regular and substantive use of group-work or whether they made only occasional use of group-work.

The absence of the skills amongst pupils to stem emotionally charged confrontations was one of the most persistent difficulties reported by teachers and experienced by pupils. This can be unsettling for teachers and pupils, particularly pupils with SEN. Helping children to regulate their feelings and to manage conflicts by helping them to take responsibility for their own behaviour and to reflect on and change their own approaches to interaction can make a big difference. Teachers felt that SPRinG training and repeated experiences of group-work led to children being better equipped and more able to deal with these difficulties independently. As one teacher said:

I: Have you've noticed a change in them (pupils)?

F: They're more aware of it [being cooperative] because at the beginning . . . , if you asked them to work in groups, they'd go 'no, not in groups' because they knew it was going to mean arguments and not getting on, but now they've got some more skills, they can get on better. And you can hear them saying to each other 'come on, you've got to look', 'we've got to get this right',

'we've got to take turns here'. So they know that those skills will help them help themselves.  
(Facilitator 2, School 4, P2)

Such experiences can be enhanced through the use of stable group compositions. Theories about group development (e.g. Tuckman 1965) would suggest that periods of conflict are not only to be expected but also can be overcome by continued stability in group membership.

## Discussion

Findings show that children with SEN often spend a large amount of time outside of the classroom, and even when in the classroom, they are often socially isolated from peers. Despite being educated in mainstream settings, they are not fully included in the social life of school. When pupils with SEN do have opportunities to work with or alongside peers, this is usually with low attaining children or other children with learning difficulties.

Whilst some of this social isolation is due to difficulties that have led to the designation of SEN, much of it may be due to inadvertent or, in some cases, deliberate separation from the class. These children are often viewed as lacking the social skills to engage, and potentially becoming academically dependent on peers or diverting other children's attention away from their learning. The allocation of a TA to work with pupils with SEN inadvertently reinforces separation and may lead to teachers taking less responsibility for planning and involving pupils with SEN in the social and academic activities within class.

There were few occasions where pupils with SEN were allowed to receive support from their peers and to participate in group-work with peers. The case studies suggest that it is possible, though rarely observed, for pupils with SEN to become positively involved with peers in the class and for the class to act as a positive resource for engaging with and supporting pupils with SEN.

Findings from the SPRinG study suggest that successful implementation of a programme of group-work in schools requires a coordinated whole-school approach with committed senior management and a dedicated person to oversee and facilitate its implementation. These are important for allowing teachers to create the time for planning and to support integration of such approaches in to their classrooms, and to enable teachers to observe, try out and get feedback on their practices.

Nevertheless, even with these features in place, implementing group-work into classrooms can still be hard for teachers and pupils. The style of working and the changing teaching and learning environment can ask a lot of both teachers and pupils. Teachers must get used to having less control over the class more generally and over what children learn. Similarly, children need training and guidance in developing the skills that can help them engage in constructive and positive interactions. Such skills include not only speaking, listening, planning and decision-making skills for participating in group-work but also relational skills to help them become more sensitive to and trusting in their classmates. In addition, and this is something not explicitly focused on during the SPRinG programme, is the need to support children in regulating their own emotions and behaviour so that they can prevent themselves from getting upset or angry and so they are better prepared for avoiding and managing petty disputes. Such skills are not easily developed and support through training, repeated experiences and group processing are important features in helping children to adapt. We found that the tensions caused by these challenges can lead teachers to not undertake pupil group-work or can lead to 'SPRinG Lite', a reduced form of SPRinG that may result in less productive interaction and may prolong uncertainties and difficulties

amongst pupils and teachers. On the other hand, those teachers who worked through difficulties and supported students found that they got used to working together and that petty squabbles were reduced and resolved independently.

The KS2 children involved in this part of the SPRinG study were having to adapt to new patterns of working and initially found this challenging. Greater use of peer learning approaches from the start of school will better equip pupils to deal with difficult situations (e.g. through self-regulation of emotion and handling of conflict). It is also important that teachers are equipped with the skills and confidence for making use of peer learning approaches as soon as they start teaching. Initial Teacher Training and school-based programmes should provide training in simple and yet effective approaches to peer co-learning which can then be further developed as newly qualified teachers gain confidence in the classroom.

One might have thought that a programme like SPRinG might enhance opportunities for children with SEN to be included within the social life of the class, but here too, despite a few positive accounts, teachers experienced difficulties. Teachers felt that it was difficult to include some pupils with SEN, that their strategies did not always help, that these pupils might get less experience of peer learning, and that often these children find it difficult to develop stable social and working relationships with peers. This is worrying because many of these pupils with SEN have an important need for the development of social skills and relationships and to be fully included in mainstream settings. There are no easy solutions or strategies for involving pupils with SEN and it would be difficult to arrive at a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution, not the least because these pupils vary widely in their characteristics and needs. It is essential that further research examine the experiences of children with SEN both during group-work and within the wider classroom context, to help identify practices and strategies for effectively involving them in peer learning and classroom life.

Currently, there are a range of interventions, both individual and group-based, that aim to support the development of social and emotional skills, coping and mental health. The MAST study showed that these interventions are often undertaken outside of the classroom with little strategic thinking about how the skills can be further supported, applied or enhanced in the classroom and wider school contexts (e.g. the playground). The child is left with the task of transferring and applying this learning into the classroom context. Furthermore, such training is largely talk-based and therapeutic, yet involves little ‘doing’ and is likely to be reflective rather than involving planning and strategic thinking. One clear way of providing useful opportunities for children with SEN to develop the social and behavioural skills they need is by involving them in regular group interaction and peer learning within the classroom context. Teachers need to think strategically about involving and supporting pupils with SEN through interactions with peers, rather than isolating these children, preventing them from getting involved or passing them around groups. Their classmates are also likely to benefit in the process, not only from having to work with, adapt to and be sensitive to such pupils but also from the inclusive attitudes and ethos that would be enhanced by the greater involvement of pupils with SEN.

We should not underestimate the challenge facing teachers and schools. Teaching children and fostering positive learning experiences are by no means straightforward and there are many pressures on schools to perform and to cover a prescribed curriculum. Incorporating peer learning strategies and group-work into everyday classroom learning can raise difficulties and challenges that can appear to detract from these wider pressures on schools. But if we are to furnish pupils with the skills to work together with others (as they have to in most communities and work places), to be tolerant of others, to celebrate

individual diversity and to enhance an enduring depth to learning and knowledge, then peer learning approaches for *all* pupils need to be a central part of pedagogic practices that teachers utilise for enhancing learning in the twenty-first century.

## Funding

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number [L139251046]] and the Nuffield Foundation.

## Note

1. In England, a ‘statement’ is provided by the Local Education Authority and indicates that to meet a child’s special educational needs, additional provision, beyond the everyday resources and provision that a school has, is required.

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