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Teamwork in Inclusive Classrooms



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This teamwork training package has the following parts:

1. Why is teamwork important in an inclusive classroom?
2. What is teamwork? Theoretical foundations
3. How does it work? How can I develop teamwork in my class?
4. Some examples of teamwork in inclusive schools (in Europe)
5. Teamwork among professionals
6. What have I learnt about teamwork?
7. Collation of references

1. Why is teamwork important in an inclusive classroom?

In the different sections of the Aide Memoir different elements of teamwork are included as basic conditions for the development of the inclusive classroom. It's a good idea to point out the advantages and problems of using teamwork:

- Teamwork advantages
 - ✓ provide a valuable opportunity to achieve high quality learning outcomes
 - ✓ foster collaboration, as well as stimulation
 - ✓ develop pupils' confidence and active participation in learning
 - ✓ prepare pupils for the workplace
 - ✓ develop a supportive working environment
 - ✓ bring together people with differing expertise and different perspectives
 - ✓ lead to creative and innovative solutions to complex problems
 - ✓ encourage pupils to challenge assumptions
 - ✓ give pupils a chance to perform a number of different roles

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- ✓ develop other skills such as project management, time management, problem solving, communication, conflict resolution and negotiation skills; and
- ✓ Can result in group outcomes of a very high standard.
- Teamwork problems:
 - ✓ not all pupils learn everything about the topic, especially if the task and workloads are divided into separate components
 - ✓ some pupils prefer to work and be assessed independently
 - ✓ there is a higher level of risk, as the uncertainty factor is higher than in the normal classroom situation
 - ✓ pupils can feel as if they have been "thrown in at the deep end" if they don't have adequate support
 - ✓ some pupils don't pull their weight
 - ✓ individual grades may be affected if an overall group mark is awarded
 - ✓ some pupils tend to dominate others in the team and can hijack agendas
 - ✓ internal team dynamics can collapse

2. What is teamwork? Theoretical foundations

A team is a group of people who work together to accomplish a common goal. The concept of teamwork is defined as "the work done by a group of pupils which has a shared awareness of identity and rules, the same aims and commitment to help the others" (Arnaiz, 1988)

Some of the interesting elements to study teamwork are:

- a. Qualities of a team
- b. Role and responsibilities of members
- c. Basic skills in a team
- d. Team development (phases of development)

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a. Qualities of a team

Some of the qualities and attribute of teamwork are the following:

- Team members share an understanding of their goals and direction
- Team members understand their roles and scopes for contribution
- Team members work together and independently to complete tasks
- Team members avoid frustrations or confusions that may jeopardise team effectiveness

The most important thing is to be aware and attentive to all pupils and give them equal opportunities for success.

b. Roles and responsibilities of members

Team roles and responsibilities are the main parts or functions placed on each member of the group. These parts must be complementary and promote the achievement of group objectives. They must also guarantee the participation of all members so that the class is genuinely inclusive. There follow descriptions of some important roles within the team:

- Team leader
 - ✓ Responsible for ensuring that the team achieves its goals on time
 - ✓ Provide structure and guidance to allow maximum participation
- Facilitator
 - ✓ Responsible for ensuring that every member participates in the team and manages conflicts
- Team Recorder
 - ✓ Responsible for documenting group activities
- Team Reflector
 - ✓ Responsible for the development of the team's process skills
- Team Explorer

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- ✓ Responsible for expanding the team's focus and providing energy to motivate the team

The responsibilities are the tasks which members must carry out in order for the team to work. These responsibilities need to be explained when the group is being formed. They must be understood as rules. An example is dealing with conflict within the team:

- Try to deal with conflicts as they arise, rather than ignoring them
- Discuss any problems as a group with everyone present
- Do not accuse each other of past failing, but focus on what needs to change
- Try and reach an understanding that everyone agrees with needs to change, and make necessary changes to the work plan accordingly

c. Basic skills in a team

The basic teamwork skills should be:

- Understand and work within the group
- Develop a strong sense of commitment and responsibilities to your work
- Stay focused on your assigned task and the team goals
- Plan and make decisions with others and support the outcomes
- Respect the thoughts and options of others in the group
- Seek a suitable team approach
- Clarify uncertainties by questioning
- Lead when appropriate, mobilising the team for high performance
- Acknowledge problems and deal with them
- Participate enthusiastically
- Handle differences or conflicts openly and positively

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It is also important to highlight the beneficial team behaviour as a working model of a team:

- Express your ideas openly and confront mistakes, confusions or frustrations
- Share your knowledge, experience, time and talents with others
- Work interactively and promote each other's success
- Support and trust others
- Understand the perception and difficulties of others
- Relate to people when working with them
- Keep an open mind to new ideas; be willing to change and appreciate other points of view
- Be willing to listen carefully to what others' have to offer
- Give direct feedback that focuses on the task, not on the individual
- Criticise only ideas, not people
- Practice self-respect and build self-esteem
- Maintain a positive attitude towards the group and task

d. Team development

It is a good idea to know the phases of development of a team in order to successfully get it to work in the school. The stages of team development and the team activities could be:

- Forming stage
 - ✓ Establish structure, rules, communication networks
 - ✓ Clarify relations and interdependencies among members
 - ✓ Identify leader roles, clarify responsibility and authority
 - ✓ Develop plans for goals accomplishment.

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- Storming stage
 - ✓ Identify and resolve interpersonal conflict.
 - ✓ Further clarify rules, goals, and structural relationships
 - ✓ Develop a climate of participation among group members
- Norming stage
 - ✓ Direct group activity toward goal accomplishment.
 - ✓ Develop data-flow & feedback systems for task performance.
 - ✓ Promote more cohesion among group members
- Performing stage
 - ✓ Leader role emphasis on facilitation, feedback, and evaluation.
 - ✓ Renewal, revision, and strengthening of roles and group interdependencies.
 - ✓ Show of strong motivation toward goal accomplishment

3. How does it work? How can I develop teamwork in my class?

Teachers must learn some basic competences to develop teamwork in their classes:

- *Planning for each stage of group work.* Thinking about how they will introduce and organise pupils in teamwork.

To introduce pupils to teamwork is useful:

- ✓ The teacher can ask pupils to reflect about their previous ideas/schemes and experience in teamwork
- ✓ The teacher might want to experiment first with informal learning teams. Afterwards, you might propose formal learning teams and long-term teams progressively.

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To organise learning teamwork the teacher must decide how the groups will be formed:

- ✓ Some teachers prefer randomly assigning pupils to groups to maximize their heterogeneity: a mix of males and females, verbal and quiet pupils, the cynical and the optimistic.
- ✓ Some teachers let pupils choose with whom they want to work, although this runs the risk that groups will socialise too much and that pupils will self-segregate.
- ✓ Still other teachers prefer to form the groups themselves, taking into account pupils' prior achievement, levels of preparation, work habits, ethnicity, and gender. They try to sprinkle the more able pupils evenly among the groups
- ✓ A middle ground, is to ask pupils to express a preference.

Learning teams work best when they are balanced in terms of their abilities and have members with varied characteristics. Ideally, group members have:

- ✓ various levels of prior achievement
- ✓ various levels of prior experience
- ✓ a gender mix
- ✓ an ethnic and linguistic mix
- ✓ various learning styles

To help in allocating pupils to a team it can be useful to use a coloured card method (all yellows together and so on) or an 'icebreaker' activity to let pupils identify others with similar interests or outline different team roles and let pupils choose their preferred role or let them self-select.

- *Explaining to their classes how the groups will operate and how pupils will be graded.* Explaining the objectives of the group task and defining any relevant concepts and tasks.

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- *Giving pupils the skills they need to succeed in groups.* (Skills like active and tolerant listening, helping one another in mastering content, giving and receiving constructive criticism, managing disagreements and so on).
- *Evaluating the effectiveness of teamwork.* Evaluating goals and objectives, trust and conflict, expression of differences, leadership, control and procedures, utilisation of resources, interpersonal communication, problem solving /decision making)

The construction of these competences implies that the teachers must be well-grounded in some aspects like:

- *Be conscious of group size.* In general, teams of four or five pupils work best. Larger groups decrease each pupil's opportunity to participate actively.
- *Keep teams together.* When a team is not working well, avoid breaking it up, even if the group requests it. It is important to learn solving problems together.
- *Help groups plan how to proceed.* Ask each group to devise a plan of action: who will be doing what and when. Review the groups' written plans or meet with each group to discuss its plan.

Teachers can design tasks that have clearly defined outcomes and variety of roles and responsibilities that facilitate the team planning.

- *Regularly check in with the teams.* Teachers can establish checkpoints with the team.

Pupil's roles are one important element to check in with the teams. Behaviour in the group can be of 3 types:

- ✓ that which helps the group accomplish its task
- ✓ that which helps group members get along better (relationships)
- ✓ self oriented behaviour which contributes to neither group task nor group relationships

Teachers must help to improve roles like:

- ✓ Harmonising

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- Attempting to reconcile disagreements
- Reducing tension
- Getting people to explore differences
- ✓ Gate keeping
 - Helping to keep communication channels open
 - Facilitating the participation of others
 - Suggesting procedures that permit sharing remarks
- ✓ Encouraging
 - Being friendly, warm, and responsive to others
 - Indicating by facial expression or remarks the acceptance of others' contributions.

Teachers must balance the roles of a team and compensate for the missing basic roles to facilitate the inclusion in it.

Teachers also must check pupils' self-oriented roles (toxic roles) in a team like:

- ✓ Dominator: interrupts others; launches into long monologues; is over-positive and over-dogmatic; tries to lead group and assert authority; is generally autocratic.
- ✓ Negativist: rejects ideas suggested by others; takes a negative attitude on issues; argues frequently and unnecessarily; pessimistic.
- ✓ Aggressor: criticises or blames others; tries to get attention; shows anger or irritation against group or individuals; deflates importance or position of others in group.
- ✓ Storyteller: likes to tell long "fishing stories" which are not relevant to the group; goes off on long tangents.
- ✓ Interrupter: talks over others; engages in side conversations; whispers to neighbour.

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- ✓ Poor me: tries to get the group's attention to deal with own personal concerns, discomfort, bad luck and so on.

Teachers can help to change these toxic roles in a team and generate other positive roles.

- *Provide mechanisms for groups to deal with problems* (uncooperative members, conflicts among members and so on)

Teachers can provide some norms to deal with problems in a team:

- ✓ Standard or group rules always develop in a group in order to control the behaviour of members.
- ✓ Norms usually express the beliefs or desires of the majority of the group members as to what behaviours should or should not take place in the group.
- ✓ These norms may be clear to all members (explicit), known or sensed by only a few (implicit), or operating completely below the level of awareness of any group members.
- ✓ Some of the usual norms of teams are the following:
 - Commit to the goals of team
 - Perform assigned tasks completely, accurately, on time.
 - Respect the contributions of others
 - Assist other team members when needed
 - Ask for help before we get into trouble
 - Follow guidelines for effective meetings
 - Actively participate in team deliberations
 - Focus on problems not people or personalities
 - Constructively resolve conflicts or differences of opinion
 - Comment clearly and constructively
 - (...)

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Teachers can encourage pupils to provide feedback when they see destructive group behaviour. On the other hand negative roles can be improved by teachers following these protocols:

- ✓ The dominating member. Teachers should try to understand why the person needs to be in control and encourage everyone's view and thought on an issue.
- ✓ The silent member. Teachers should consider reasons behind the silent and encourage him/her to speak.
- ✓ The critical member. Teachers can help to change this role talking with the person privately about how criticism are affecting the group.

There are many types of teams composed through complexity criteria that teachers and educators should differentiate in order to promote inclusively in their classroom:

- *Formal learning teams* are teams established to complete a specific task, such as perform an experiment, write a report, carry out a project and so on. These groups may complete their work in a single class session or over several sessions. Typically, pupils work together until the task is finished, and their project is graded.
- *Informal learning teams* are ad hoc temporary groups of pupils within a single class session. Informal learning groups can be initiated, for example, by asking pupils to turn to a neighbour and spend two minutes discussing a question you have posed. You can also form groups of three to five to solve a problem or other class task.
- *Long-term teams* (usually existing over a long period of the course) with stable membership whose primary responsibility is to provide members with support, encouragement, and assistance in completing course requirements and assignments.

4. Some examples of teamwork in inclusive school (in Europe)

In most European countries the aim of compulsory education is that of providing pupils with quality education that enables them to acquire basic cultural skills as well as fostering their own personal development (social skills, study and work habits, creativity

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and affectivity...) Compulsory education should help pupils to develop the abilities which enable them to achieve these important aims (among others):

- To know the values and rules for coexistence in order to prepare them to actively exercise citizenship.
- To develop individual initiative and teamwork, fostering self-confidence, pupil initiative and critical awareness.
- To know and respect different cultures, individual differences and equal rights both for men and women.

In recent years, some ways of working about teamwork have been developed in Europe to promote inclusiveness:

a. Group dynamics (Esteve Pujol 2007; A.Diez de Ulzurrun and A. Masegosa, 1996)

Some schools use group dynamics to increase good relationships among pupils and the best contribution of every pupil to the work group. Group dynamic activities develop some skills referring to communication, confidence among group members, decision-making, problem solving, conflict resolution and cohesiveness. Also group dynamic activities encourage collaboration and creativity.

Effective group dynamics require respect for one another, clearly articulated shared goals, frequent interaction, equally divided tasks, and shared responsibility for mistakes and successes and free expression of opinions and perspectives.

A course of group dynamics has many of the following sections: Introduction to group dynamics, group goals and social interdependence, communication within groups, leadership, decision making, creativity, conflict resolution, diagnosis and intervention in a group, learning group skills...

b. Collaborative learning (Pere Pujolàs, 2003)

Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of pupils working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. In the school, groups provide support, an academic framework to learn, a conduit for encouragement, and in many ways, a buffer that can prevent academic failure. In a group setting, the pupil has the opportunity to rehearse his understanding with others and to be exposed to other conceptual constructs.

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Successful collaborative learning requires effective and appropriate implementation of pupil groups. Depending on the purpose and longevity of the group, the teacher needs to consider the size and composition of the group and the amount of direction or guidance given.

Base groups are a type of work group. They last the entire term (or even several weeks), meet regularly, require planning as to the size and composition of the group, and personalise the task at hand by providing support and encouragement between group members.

Collaborative group work is not simply having pupils sit together and talk. It is not giving the same individual task to several pupils and telling them to talk about the assignment with each other. To make collaborative learning a success, there must be some kind of essential component that holds the group together such as positive interdependence, face-to-face interactions, individual accountability, distinct roles, personal responsibility, teamwork and social skills and group processing.

The advantage of collaborative learning is that it is effective in helping pupils learn and it may reach pupils at different learning levels. This way of working has been increased in the last few years in many schools. Little by little collaborative learning is becoming one important resource for inclusive schools. Pere Pujolàs has been one of the leading advocates in Catalonia.

c. Peer mentoring (LIC service Department of Education, 2003)

Peer mentors are trained to work with other pupils in school to develop positive relationships and help special needs pupils or immigrant pupils with their worries, problems and difficulties.

Peer mentoring will support the school in the following ways:

- facilitate the welcome and adaptation for special needs or immigrant pupils
- contribute to strategies related to positive behaviour management
- help to address issues of behaviour and attendance
- support the development of social skills
- help overcome barriers to learning

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The mentor training covers the following areas: What is a mentor?, rights and responsibilities, active listening, acknowledging feelings, helping the mentee to find solutions, confidentiality, peer mentor safety rules...

Some teachers use peer mentoring as a form of team work to improve the relationships and the pupils learning in the class. This resource is promoted by Service LIC (Department of Education) in some inclusive schools.

d. *Peer mediation (M.C. Boqué, 2003; Innovation Projects-Depart of Education)*

Peer mediation is a service that the pupils themselves can use to resolve conflicts that they are having with other pupils. It gives the pupils an opportunity to be more independent and solve conflicts in a mature responsible manner.

Peer mediation is confidential. The mediators will not discuss your session outside the mediation room.

The steps involved in mediation are the following:

- Getting each side of the story
- Sharing feelings from both sides
- Brainstorming solutions
- Compromising to make an agreement
- Signing an agreement

At the conclusion of peer mediation, an agreement will be completed and signed by everyone in the room. The mediators will then follow up on the mediation session within the week. The peer mediation can be done in informal spaces like the playground, by any pupils of the class or school accepted by the antagonists.

Some volunteer pupils or all pupils from inclusive schools are trained in the peer mediation process. All pupils are given equal opportunity to act as peer mediators. This approach is used mostly in schools to help to encourage pupils' alternative forms of dispute resolution.

Sometimes there is a training course for mediators for teachers, parents and pupils all together. They can learn and practice some skills related to process mediation.

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There are many schools with innovative projects about mediation in the last five years in Catalonia promoted by the Department of Education.

5. Teamwork among professionals

Educators are being asked to collaborate with each other, with administrators and district officials, with pupils, with parents, and with community members. What most realise after the first few experiences with any of these demands is that “collaboration” requires a lot of time and meetings. In fact, collaboration is hard work that takes time, commitment, skills, and the kind of continuity that helps to build a shared understanding.

Teamwork is a form of collective work where educators and school professionals come together to *share* ideas, strategies, even possible solutions. Each member has their own *individual task*, but these separate tasks can benefit from hearing what colleagues are doing or have done with similar tasks.

Most educators were not specifically prepared to work together. Historically, teachers were prepared for “individual practice” rather than “group practice.” Teachers were expected to take their pupils, close their doors, and do their jobs. Therefore teamwork skills must be learnt by the professionals in the inclusive school.

In the Inclusive school educators are being required to work together in more ways:

- School professionals must articulate a mission and work collaboratively to achieve it.
- School professionals must collect and interpret a wide variety of information to ensure that their pupils are succeeding at higher levels of achievement in alignment with curriculum frameworks and standards. Educators must collaborate in using curriculum frameworks to design curriculum and teaching for each pupil, including pupils with disabilities.
- Teachers must collaboratively inquire into their practice in order to continue to learn and improve as professionals.
- School professionals must collaborate with families and community members to tailor school efforts and curriculum to local standards and needs.

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Some special skills are required for teamwork:

- Skills of planning work. Auto evaluate what people are good at and then assign roles accordingly. Set deadlines for each group member. Manage time to finish team outlines.
- Skills of communication like becoming better listeners, expressing ideas effectively, asking for help when it is necessary...
- Skills of responsibility. Everyone is responsible not only for their own work but for the work of every other member of the school community.
- Skills of supportive diversity. Collaborative experiences allow professionals to overcome prejudices.
- Skills of feedback and evaluation. The experience and opinion of different professionals help to improve the quality of products, processes and relationships of inclusive school.

To sum up, working in a team is a question of skills but it also presupposes the conviction that cooperation is a positive professional value. These two aspects (skills and the conviction of the value of teamwork) are more closely related than is thought: what people haven't mastered is normally undervalued (Perrenoud, 1999)

Training needs detected in the area of the development of teamwork tend to be related to similar aspects of teamwork among pupils, its organisation, its value or basic skills necessary for carrying it out. Some training in group dynamics or team building can help professionals to improve these elements.

6. What have I learnt about teamwork?

Teamwork is basic to promoting inclusion in a class. Some important elements must be learnt by teachers to introduce and organise teamwork properly. There are some basic questions in order to help every teacher to evaluate him/herself here:

- Why is teamwork important in an inclusive classroom?
- Which are the best qualities of teamwork to promote inclusion in the classroom?
- What is teamwork?

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- How can I introduce teamwork in a classroom?
- How can I organise teamwork in a classroom?
- How can I evaluate teamwork in a classroom?
- Which examples of teamwork are carried out in inclusive schools in Europe?
- What do I need to participate in teamwork among professionals?
- What resources about teamwork do I know?
- How can I transfer these course contents to my professional situation?

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