QLANTIC
JOURNAL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCES

An Action Research to Enhance Students' Classroom Engagement through Group Tasks among 8th Graders

Maimoona Naeem [1]   Mohsin Azam [2]   Mubashir Shahzad [3]

Abstract: *This study investigated the effect of employing group tasks to improve student engagement in classroom at level of Grade VIII. Engaging students in the learning process presents a significant challenge for educators. This study examined how several group tasks affect student engagement in Grade 8th (A). The study incorporated a single-group pre-post experimental quantitative design; quantitative data was collected over ten weeks. The data encompassed observation rating scale. The sample was based on 40 students who were selected through purposive technique from Government Boys High School Bagrian, Lahore. Descriptive and inferential data analyses techniques were used. Findings suggested a strong link between the implementation of group tasks by increased student engagement. Students participated in group tasks showed active involvement, and deeper engagement in the learning process. The analyses revealed the positive effect of group tasks on student engagement within the one grade and classroom. This research contributed by highlighting the importance of group tasks, in creating an effective learning environment through engagement for Grade 8th students. The implications extend beyond academic performance to include the holistic development of adolescents, nurturing both cognitive and social skills.*

Key Words: Students' Engagement, Group Task, Classroom Engagement

Introduction

In the realm of education, fostering student's engagement stands as a paramount factor in facilitating effective learning experiences. Engaged students exhibit higher levels of motivation, participation, and overall academic achievement. The classroom setting, particularly in Grade 8, is pivotal in shaping students' attitudes towards learning. Exploring strategies to enhance student engagement becomes imperative for educators and researchers alike.

Student engagement transcends mere attendance or completion of tasks; it encapsulates the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural investment in learning activities. Zimmerman (2000) defines engagement as "the extent to which students are engaged cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally in learning." This multifaceted involvement significantly influences learning outcomes, leading to improved retention, critical thinking, and overall academic success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Various sstudies have emphasized that engaged students show better levels of motivation that correlates with better effort and persistence in academics (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The operation of group chores within the learning framework has gathered attention as a compelling instructional tool to expand student engagement. Group jobs encompass collective activities where learners work organized to achieve a shared aim, offer a vigorous approach to knowledge (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Such collective tasks diverge from problem-solving to project-based tasks, inspiring interaction, teamwork, and communal responsibility among students (Slavin, 2014).

[1] Lecturer, Division of Education, University of Education, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
[2] Undergraduate Scholar, Division of Education, University of Education, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Emai: mohsinazam015@gmail.com
[3] PhD Scholar, Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: f2021095014@umt.edu.pk

Research designates that group works create a situation advantageous to dynamic learning and expressive engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Group tasks offer chances for peer learning, endorsing the development of societal skills, compassion, and leadership abilities (Webb, 2009).

The collective nature of group tasks strengthens motivation and liability among students (Johnson & Smith, 2014). The intrinsic motivation stemming from peer interaction and shared responsibility often leads to increased effort and persistence in accomplishing the task at hand (Slavin, 2014). This cooperative venue also deals a helpful stage for students to discover their strong points by enhancing confidence in their abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Regardless of the possible benefits, the execution of group tasks in classrooms is not without defies. Issues such as imbalanced participation, clashes among group members, and individual accountability often intervene (Gillies, 2016). Effective structure of group tasks, clarity in communication of goals, and direction on teamwork plan are vital to lessen these challenges and guarantee justifiable participation (Gillies, 2016; Tuckman, 1965).

Background and Objectives

The researcher as teacher observed that students of Grade 8th section A of Government Boys High School of Bagrian, run into a repeated hindrance in maintaining continual student engagement. The problem of limited and reduced involvement of students in the learning process rings a noteworthy alarm for educators in education. Within this context, there was a persistent ultimatum to implement an effective group based pedagogical learning strategies for Grade 8th students of section "A". The lack in engagement not only affects academic achievements but also hinders the development of essential collaborative and social skills essential for their future accomplishments. The researcher as instructor detected that learner of Grade 8th section A run into a frequent obstacle in maintaining sustained student engagement, leading to sub optimum learning practices and results.

"The central problem addressed by current action research centres on measuring the effect of group tasks as a viable solution to enhance student engagement within Grade 8th classrooms".

The objective of the present study was to investigate the effect of group tasks on students' classroom engagement for grade 8th at Government High School Bagrian Lahore.

H_{01}: There is no effect of group tasks on classroom engagement among students in 8th grade.

Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to the one school "Government Boys High School Bagrian, Lahore. One class of 8th grade section "A". Limited group activities mentioned in table 1 were included for treatment in a single course of English.

The significance of student engagement is deep-rooted, there remains a shortage of group based strategies tailored to Grade 8th classrooms precisely aimed at enhancing engagement. This research pursues to bond this gap by examining the effect of group tasks on engagement levels holds the possible to deal valuable understandings for teachers, curriculum developers, and academic legislative bodies.

Review of Literature

Enhancing student engagement in the 8th-grade classroom is critical for fostering effective learning experiences. Student engagement is multi-layered, covering social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions. Group tasks have appeared as a pedagogical approach to endorse engagement by encouraging collaboration, critical and active participation amongst students (Webb, 2009).

Examination by Johnson and Johnson (1994) highlighted that cooperative learning in nurturing positive interdependence, individual liability, and social skills amongst pupils. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlighted the starring role of social collaboration in logical development, supporting the notion that joint activities can enhance learning outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978).

Classroom engagement includes students' assurance to learning, their active involvement, and the emotional ties they form with the subject matter (Fredricks et al., 2004). In 8th-grade classrooms, utilizing group tasks has developed as a valued strategy for cultivation of engagement as it accommodates many learning styles and stimulates peer interaction (Slavin, 2014).

Group tasks comprise a range of activities where students work collaboratively, towards a common goal. They endow active learning, encourage problem-solving, and enhance critical thinking skills (Kagan, 1994). A study by Roseth, Johnson, and Johnson (2008) proved that well-designed group tasks positively impact academic achievement and social development. Group tasks endorse a sense of shared responsibility among students, nurturing a supportive environment where they learn from one another (Cohen, 1994). However, tasks such as unequal contribution, conflicts, and social loafing can deter the effectiveness of group tasks (Webb, 2009).

Effective application of group tasks requires careful planning and consideration of various factors. Forming clear goals, defining roles, and providing structured guidance are essential (Slavin, 2015). Additionally, incorporating technology into group tasks can improve engagement by leveraging multimedia resources and online collaboration platforms (Chen, 2010). However, it's vital to balance technology use to avoid distractions and certify the focus remains on the learning objectives.

The previous studies regarding gauging the effect of group tasks in enhancing student engagement involved both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Observations, surveys, and academic performance assessments are commonly engaged methods (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014). Despite the benefits, implementing group tasks in 8th-grade classrooms comes with its set of encounters and deliberations. One primary concern is the potential for unequal sharing among group members. Studies by Gillies (2003) and Webb (2009) highlighted cases where certain students dominate discussions while others remain passive, impacting the equitable dissemination of learning chances.

Addressing this challenge require proactive measures such as conveying specific roles or rotating roles within groups, setting clear beliefs for participation, and raising an inclusive environment where all voices are valued (Gillies, 2003; Tomlinson, 2001).

Teachers play an essential role in enabling successful group tasks implementation. Further than content delivery, their role shifts to a facilitator who guides, monitors, and supports students through the learning process (Slavin, 2015). Providing explicit instructions, modeling collaborative behaviors, and offering timely feedback are essential aspects of active teacher support to improve classroom engagement (Cohen, 1994).

Exploring varied group structures and dynamics can enhance the effectiveness of collaborative tasks. While traditional small-group settings are common, adopting other configurations such as jigsaw groups, peer tutoring pairs, or larger heterogeneous teams can offer distinct learning experiences (Aronson, 1978). Each structure presents unique opportunities for peer interaction, skill development, and knowledge sharing.

Periodically rotating group members or allowing students to self-select their groups can diversify interactions, encourage social connections, and minimize potential conflicts that may arise from fixed groupings (Gillies, 2003). Flexibility in group formation enables teachers to cater to the diverse needs and preferences of students, maximizing engagement and learning opportunities.

Methodology of the Study

The inclination for a quantitative approach in this research is grounded in the need for a detailed comprehension of the multifaceted dynamics involved in student engagement within the classroom setting. By the application of quantitative methods, researchers can gather data on several sides of engagement, including "participation rates, attitudes toward group tasks, academic performance, and behavioural patterns" (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Pre-test post-test single group experimental design assists as a strong method to scientifically investigate and quantify the effect of group tasks on student engagement in Grade 8 classrooms and provides valued empirical evidence (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The sample was consisted of forty students of 8th-grade. The purposive sampling technique allowed the investigation on targeted students with low engagement to check the effects of group tasks. The research findings and interventions implemented would be directly applicable to the students in that specific class. Researchers intentionally chosen the participants based on specific criteria related to the research purpose. In distinction to random sampling, where all participants of the population have an equal chance of being selected, purposive sampling purposefully selects individuals with certain characteristics or experiences believed crucial to the study.

The working tool was an observation rating scale to calculate the student engagement during the implementation of group tasks. The observation rating scale by Cassar & Jang, (2010) was adapted within the classroom setting.

Two experts were consulted to determine the content validity of the tool. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, a widely utilized statistic for measuring internal consistency (Creswell, 2022).

Cronbach's alpha calculates the average correlation among all possible pairs of items on a scale. The alpha coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater internal consistency. In this case, Cronbach's alpha value was 0.82, proposing a good level of internal consistency for the tool. A normally recognised edge for good internal consistency is about 0.70 or greater, but the acceptable level may differ dependent on the context (Creswell, 2022).

Intervention

The course of English was selected to provide intervention or treatment to the students. The intervention was lasted for ten weeks. The pre-test data was collected in the first week of teaching and the post-test data was collected at the last day of teaching and intervention. The group activities were delimited to the table 1 given below.

Table 1

Weeks	Objective	Activities
1-2	Encourage classroom engagement through understanding of group tasks	**Introduction to Group Activities** During the initial weeks, students are introduced to the concept of group tasks and the importance of collaborative learning. They are then divided into groups, taking into consideration diverse skill sets, personalities, and learning preferences to ensure balanced and effective teams.
3-4	Encourage classroom engagement through interaction	**Icebreaker Games and Collaborative Reading Sessions** Students engage in group reading sessions, exploring literature together. This not only enhances their comprehension skills but also encourages peer-to-peer discussions, fostering a deeper understanding of the text. Through guided discussions, students learn to express their thoughts, listen actively, and build on each other's ideas.
5-6	Engage in group activity through participation in tasks	**Project-Based Assignments** The middle phase of the intervention introduces project-based assignments. After a Whiteboard brainstorming session Groups are tasked with selecting a topic related to the English curriculum, conducting research, and presenting their findings to the class. This promotes independent learning, research skills, and effective communication.

| 7-8 | Encourage classroom engagement through interaction | **Group Discussions** Students participate in structured group discussions on various literary works. They are encouraged to talk about themes, characters, and plot developments. This phase aims to develop the ability to share opinions, and the confidence to engage in thoughtful debates. |
| 9-10 | Assess engagement during presentations | **Hosting Assemblies and presenting in classroom** The final weeks culminate in group presentations where each team showcases their understanding of a specific English language concept. Additionally, students engage in reflective activities, sharing their thoughts on the overall experience and the impact of group tasks on their engagement and learning. |

Data Analyses

The observational rating scale served as a fundamental tool in quantifying and assessing student engagement throughout the study. Employed during classroom observations before, during, and after the integration of group tasks, this scale facilitated the systematic and objective evaluation of various engagement indicators. These indicators encompassed aspects such as active participation, peer interaction, attentiveness, and collaboration among grade 8th students.

Utilizing the observational rating scale data involved a quantitative approach, Descriptive statistics were computed to portray the distribution and trends in observed engagement levels (Artis, 2023).

Observing Engagement of Students

Scale: 1: Never | 2: Rarely | 3: Sometimes | 4: Frequently | 5: Always

Table 2

Indicators		Scale									
		1		**2**		**3**		**4**		**5**	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1	Pays attention in class	17	1	14	4	5	1	3	24	1	10
2	Works well with other children in groups	23	1	11	5	4	2	2	24	0	8
3	Attempts to do his work thoroughly and well in groups	20	0	15	2	3	2	1	18	1	18
4	Acts actively able to sit still in groups	21	1	9	1	5	3	3	18	2	17
5	Participates actively in discussions in groups	21	0	8	1	6	4	4	19	1	16
6	Completes assigned seatwork in groups	16	0	13	2	5	2	5	20	1	16
7	Does not annoys peers during work in groups	19	0	15	2	5	4	1	23	0	11
8	Is determined when confronted with problems in groups	27	1	10	3	2	4	1	21	0	11
9	Seems to know what is going on in class	10	2	13	4	10	1	7	21	0	12
10	Communicates well in groups	19	0	16	1	3	2	1	20	1	17

11	Approaches new assignments with sincere efforts in groups	27	0	8	2	4	2	1	20	0	16
12	Asks questions to get more information in groups	23	1	12	2	4	2	1	20	0	15
13	Takes independent initiative, must be helped to get started and kept going on work in groups	30	0	8	1	2	3	0	21	0	15
14	Tries to finish assignments even when they are difficult in groups	33	4	5	2	1	4	1	21	0	9
15	Raises his/her hand to answer a question or volunteer information in groups	35	0	3	0	1	2	1	17	0	21

Findings

1. In pre-test 78% students out of 40 were falling in the less engaged categories which were never and rarely engaged in classroom. In the post test more students were falling under the category of frequently and always engaged with percentage of 85%.
2. In pre-test 85% students were falling under the category of are never and rarely while in post-test 80% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
3. In pre-test 87% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 90% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
4. In pre-test 75% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 88% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
5. In pre-test 73% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 88% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
6. In pre-test 73% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 80% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
7. In pre-test 85% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 85% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
8. In pre-test 93% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 83% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
9. In pre-test 58% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 83% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
10. In pre-test 88% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 93% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
11. In pre-test 88% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 90% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
12. In pre-test 88% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 88% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
13. In pre-test 95% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 90% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
14. In pre-test 88% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 75% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
15. In pre-test 95% students were falling under the category of never and rarely while in post-test 95% were falling in the categories of frequently and always.
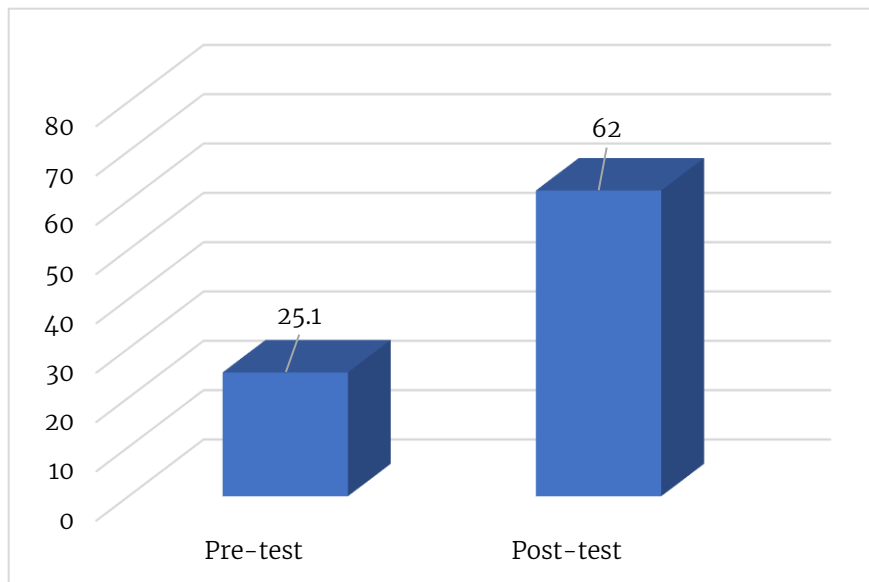
Hypothesis Testing through paired sample *t-test*

Table 2

Difference		*Mean*	*n*	*Std. Deviation*
Pair	Pre-test	25.1	40	12.3
	Post-test	62.0	40	12.1

Figure 1

The difference in Means Values of Pre-test and Post-test

The descriptive and inferential analyses of the pre-test revealed that most students were discontented due to their lack of engagement, prominently noted by the substantial figures in the "never" and "rarely" categories. The absence of active participation was evident, as highlighted in table 1. This prompted the researcher to devise an intervention plan aimed at fostering student involvement. Consequently, students displaying low engagement were selected for the intervention to assess the disparities in their pre-and post-treatment outcomes.

The post-test findings based on descriptive and inferential statistics of the study distinctly showcased an enhancement in students' performance across the scale. There was a noticeable increase in the proportion of students consistently and frequently demonstrating engagement. The rating scale highlighted a marked improvement in students' confidence levels following the intervention. This unequivocally demonstrated the positive impact of the treatment on fostering students' confidence.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this action research underscores the transformative influence of targeted classroom group activities on student engagement. By integrating these activities and encouraging active involvement in the learning process, a discernible enhancement in students' engagement levels emerged. These findings illuminate the pivotal role played by activities that go beyond mere academic content, emphasizing the cultivation of student engagement. The comparison between pre-test and post-test data is commonly used in research to assess the effect of an intervention or measure changes resulting from a specific treatment or approach. The differences between the two sets of observations help researchers evaluate the intervention's efficacy in influencing the observed behaviors or attributes.

References

Aronson, E. (1978). *The jigsaw classroom.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* W. H. Freeman and Company.

Casel. (2020). what is SEL? Retrieved from https://casel.org/what-is-sel/

Cassar, A. G., & Jang, E. E. (2010). Investigating the effects of a game-based approach in teaching word recognition and spelling to students with reading disabilities and attention deficits. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, *15*(2), 193-211. https://doi.org/10.1080/19404151003796516

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education.* (8th ed.). Routledge.

Cohen, E. G. (1994). Restructuring the classroom: Conditions for productive small groups. *Review of Educational Research*, *64*(1), 1-35. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543064001001

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* (6th ed.). Sage.

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. M. (2013). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in human behavior.* Springer.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Dweck, C. S. (2006). Mindset: *The new psychology of success.* New York, NY: Random House.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools (3rd ed.).* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of educational research*, 74(1), 59-109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003

Gillies, R. M. (2003). The behaviors and interactions of adolescent students in cooperative learning groups. *The Journal of Early Adolescence,* 23(1), 23-47.

Gillies, R. (2016). Cooperative learning: Review of research and practice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(3), 39-54. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2016v41n3.3

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1994). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning (4th ed.).* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2014). Cooperative learning: Improving university instruction by basing practice on validated theory. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching,* 25(3&4), 85–118.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2005). New developments in social interdependence theory. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 131(4), 285-358. https://doi.org/10.3200/mono.131.4.285-358

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning. *Educational Researcher*, 38(5), 365-379. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x09339057

Roseth, C. J., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2008). Promoting early adolescents' achievement and peer relationships: The effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 223-246. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.223

Slavin, R. E. (2014). Making cooperative learning powerful. *Educational Leadership*, 72(2), 22-26.

Slavin, R. E. (2014). Cooperative learning in elementary schools. *Education 3-13*, 43(1), 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.963370

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms.* ASCD.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin,* 63(6), 384–399. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.

Webb, N. M. (2009). The teacher's role in promoting collaborative dialogue in the classroom. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 79(1), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1348/000709908x380772