



Managing Group Work in the Social Studies Classrooms in Elite Schools: An Analysis of Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract: *Teaching students and managing their performances is a challenging task, and there are several ways to manage them. When students are grouped, their performance is much more fruitful and productive, but managing them is difficult. This research aims to find social studies teacher perspectives regarding managing group work in the elite school classroom. This study incorporated a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore social studies teachers' challenges when managing group work in their class. Purposive sampling was used to collect data from elite school social studies teachers. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the beliefs of elite school teachers regarding group work. The study's findings suggest that group work is a general and rich approach often used by social studies teachers in elite schools. Social studies teachers face many challenges in managing group work. Moreover, students also complain about their dissatisfaction with their group members. However, it is also noted that group work increases efficiency and productivity in students and makes the classroom an interactive place to study.*

Key Words: Group Work, Elite Schools, Social Studies Teachers' Beliefs, Phenomenological Approach

Introduction

Man is, by nature, a social animal. Survival in isolation is a highly implausible claim, yet maintaining one's identity in society is the most sought-after human trait. Man, therefore, likes to live in society, interact with others around him, influence others, and enjoy making collaborative efforts at the same time (Grzimek, Kinnamon, & Marks, 2020; Situmorang, 2021). Individuals who lack the ability to communicate and collaborate with others usually underperform. Educationists, therefore, emphasize inculcating collaborative skills in students from the beginning of their educational journey and equipping them with

problem-solving skills (Vera, Campuzano, & Laz, 2020). Group work happens to be a comprehensive approach that makes student thinking and learning powerful (Panhwar, Umrani, & Chandio, 2017). It has proved to be very practical in different disciplines (Khan & Akhtar, 2017).

Because group work is complicated to manage and the success is largely dependent upon the teachers' ability to lead and engage students in a fruitful collaboration than it is on students' willingness to work with each other, teachers usually tend to avoid engaging students in group work regardless of the effectiveness and benefits it brings forth (A. R.

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[Rezaei, 2018](#)). Group work is often regarded as the collaboration among students where students are taught to work through problems and assessments together. Students are empowered to delegate roles and responsibilities, pool their knowledge and skills, and receive support from each other in order to develop skills that are needed to survive professionally later in their lives (Chang & Brickman, 2018; [Harianto, Rusijiono, Masitoh, & Setyawan, 2020](#)) ([Šerić & Garbin Praničević, 2018a](#)). Group tasks not only instill skills that benefit the group on the whole, but it has also been significant in enhancing the students' ability to break complex tasks into parts and steps, manage time, and stronger and on-point communication leading to refine and enhanced understanding through discussions.

Learning benefits of group work is no less significant for teachers. Students usually approach the problems in novel ways that are often refreshing for the faculty on the whole. However, the group works often backfires badly. Teachers usually are unable to aptly design, supervise and assess the students in a way that is conducive to meaningful teamwork and deep collaboration ([Buchs, Filippou, Pulfrey, & Volpé, 2017a](#)). While designing group work is demanding in many ways, teachers are required to carefully consider the complexities involved. Managing time during the semester to meet the academic demands and monitor group progress, on the whole, mitigating coordination costs, addressing pre-existing and potential motivation problems, strategies for robust creativity and productivity of groups, proactive dealing with the team and group dynamics, thoughtful combination of learning objectives and assessment approaches and assessing individuals, as well as group learning, require a lot of effort and hard work that most of the teachers may not apprehend at times ([Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020a](#)).

Ample evidence is available on exploring the group and their dynamics, the benefits of group learning, and the reasons for which teachers are reluctant to adopt group work as the mode of working in their education ([Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993](#); Cohen &

Lotan, 2014; [Wells & Jones, 2010](#)), this study is yet unique for its context of exploring the beliefs of social studies teachers in particular regarding managing group work in their classrooms.

Social studies is a core course in Pakistan and are given prime importance in the curriculum. While social studies are taught across Pakistan, aiming at building a strong sense of citizenship and social norms, the teachers' strategies usually undermine the subject's teaching purpose ([Baig, 2011](#); [Dinç & Üztemur, 2017](#)). Because social studies develop a sense of social responsibility among students, it is important to understand if group work commingles with the subject ([Nowell, 2017](#)).

Moreover, studies regarding the specificity of schools, especially elite schools, for employing group work are rare. There is a need to explore teaching approaches like group work in different courses and educational sectors. According to the past literature, few studies are relevant to group work in social studies and elite schools' classrooms. Therefore, this research intends to explore the practices of social studies teachers regarding group work in elite schools in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Students lacking knowledge and skills provided by the teachers in the classroom are typical of educational cultures. To overcome any such hindrances in the classroom, researchers and policy maker regarded group work as one of the most effective strategies ([Šerić & Garbin Praničević, 2018a](#)). It allows children to boost their skills and show their spirit to share and cooperate with their peers ([Saghafian & O'Neill, 2018](#)). It helps children become an expert in that particular task ([Evnitskaya, 2021](#)). It not only upgrades students learning but also develops attitudes of cooperation and sharing. Students usually like to work with their friends. They find it a healthy activity to interact with their peers and complete the tasks before the usual timings ([Williams, Cera Guy, & Shore, 2019](#)). It seems to be valuable for instructors and children to learn a lot, make

them engage in healthy tasks, and, most importantly, save time and make students proactive. It is experienced that group work creates contentment, a feeling of pleasure, and a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom (A. R. [Rezaei, 2018](#)). [Alfares \(2017\)](#) states that cooperative teaching helps children to become self-supporting and assists their peers to know new things and maintain their work and friendships. Group work can be more helpful when it is practised according to the needs of the students and the content ([Zainuddin & Perera, 2019](#)). Group work enhances creativity, interaction, engagement, and brainstorming among youngsters. They learn how to deal with diversity and disputes ([Grzimek et al., 2020](#)). The structure of group work is significant for making this approach effective. Group work is widely used in elementary and high school ([Gast, Schildkamp, & van der Veen, 2017](#)). These strategies are usually offered in elite schools/institutions, where schools and parents can invest adequately. Elite schools often prefer group work in the early education of children ([Moghal & Aziz, 2018](#)). In a recent study conducted by ([Don & Raman, 2019](#)), standards were set by the researchers regarding the efficacy of group work: set aims properly, collaborate properly, share their thought, take responsibility for your actions, and provide continuous feedback. A. R. Rezaei (2018) has offered some variables that can take part in impacting teamwork:

According to A. [Rezaei \(2017\)](#), group work in online classes helps students communicate properly rather than in classroom discussions. Studies suggest that the effectiveness of any strategy can be best understood in online classrooms, and group work was found to be equally effective in online settings ([Glenn G Smith, Heindel, & Torres-Ayala, 2008](#)). Contrary to the notion, the findings of another study showed a higher level of students' exertion when engaged in group work during online classes. ([Glenn Gordon Smith et al., 2011](#)).

Several studies have mentioned the impact of the size of the team on the performances of students. Large groups can sometimes be

challenging to manage by teachers and also by students. Children prefer to work in small teams, which makes them more focused on their work. At the same time, groups with many students can sometimes perform better than groups with few students, and sometimes it's vice versa ([Cummings, Kiesler, Bosagh Zadeh, & Balakrishnan, 2013](#)). The prime focus should be on task completion rather than the size of the team. Instead of this expansion or contraction in the team candidates, the kind of relationship that peers may have may be influential ([Ravshanova & Isanova, 2020](#)).

Vygotsky (1987) claims that interaction, society, and environment are the primary sources that help grow and develop children. According to the theory, social interaction helps students grasp a topic's meaning and generate their ideas simultaneously. It helps Vygotsky explain the approach by quoting the example of a newborn who learns from his family. With time when he interacts with more people, he grasps faster. Group work is under the umbrella of some more theories like cognitive development theory and social interdependence theory ([Panhwar et al., 2017](#)).

Cognitive development theory emphasizes the interactions among children and the environment from which they learn new things and generate new knowledge from themselves. Piaget's theory has a deep connection with the class environment. He thinks that the class environment is the liveliest place where all the essential elements are provided to the student to help them develop their knowledge about themselves and the existing world.

Group work in the light of these theories can be implemented efficiently and more reasonable way. These theories can be more successful if they are blended and implemented in the classroom context. Still, a lot of work is needed to determine the factors that can be efficient and suitable for making group work successful in the classroom context. Several kinds of research on group work have shown the barriers and challenges in using the group work approach ([Jolliffe & Snaith, 2017](#)). Some of the challenges that were discussed in the study of [Buchs et al. \(2017a\)](#). It shows that

even making the team is a challenging task for an instructor. It is a difficult task to arrange students in a group and then assign them a job. Students are not willing to work in a group, and expertise is also a barrier for some teachers.

Instructors' perspectives are proved to be influential in classroom settings. Not all teachers have the same views about the group work approach. It depends on their knowledge, expertise, and availability of resources for using this method. [Alias et al. \(2017\)](#) found out that instructors have positive views regarding the group work approach. They have highlighted that instructors think of group work to understand the content and grasp its meaning well. Their mixed-methods study concluded that group work is very beneficial, and instructors perceived it as a helpful approach, but it still has some drawbacks to implement in some contexts owing to its complex nature, lack of resources, training and knowledge ([Hulewicz, 2020](#); [Miquel & Duran, 2017](#)). Additionally, teachers' self-efficacy plays a vital role in the successful conduction of group work. It is more likely for a self-assured teacher to implement the technique than a teacher struggling with their competencies ([Alias et al., 2017](#)). However, diversity in the classroom, group structure and student motivation to the participants within a group setting has been strong determinants of the success of the said process ([Prescott, 1990](#); [Yasmin, Naseem, & Masso, 2019](#)).

There is no debate on the importance of teaching social studies. It is critical for developing an understanding of the world students live in, which consequently helps them in making informed decisions regarding the issues that may affect them while they grow up ([Abdu-Raheem, 2015](#)). A research study concluding students' perception of social studies highlighted that they found the subject rather monotonous and absolutely irrelevant to their daily lives. Moreover, the complaint is that studying social studies is no fun because it lacks activities and is usually content-based, which involves memorizing the dates and events. Considering these aspects of social studies, teachers should pay attention to their

instructional approaches and class tasks to not lose their interest in social studies ([Uztemur, Dinc, & Acun, 2019](#)).

Teaching social studies, wherefore, demands teachers to be proactive and think of engaging yet interesting ways to teach a comparatively dry subject ([Chiodo & Byford, 2004](#)). Group work has been regarded as an effective strategy for teaching social studies as it suffices the concerns raised above (Gull & Shehzad, 2015) ([Afzal, 2020](#)). Çepni and Öner (2015) suggested that choosing suitable instructional methods can solve many ambiguities and misconceptions about social studies. Finally, social studies show a bond with the group work strategy as social studies reflect society and research of people interaction. [Hendrix \(1999\)](#) have emphasized various group work features in their studies, which teachers identified while integrating the group work approach in their classroom. The essential components that can be seen usually in group work are Constructive collaboration, Feedback, Confidence and communication and sharing of thoughts. Considering the essentials of groups, studies regarding social studies showed different activities to group work suitable for teachers to use in their lectures. These activities include puzzles, exploration, inquiry, and group matches. These activities were considered an effective way to instruct social studies using the group work method. Social studies teachers think of these activities to improve student performance by using a group work approach ([Hendrix, 1999](#)).

A study was conducted on seven class students to evaluate their group work performance in social studies courses. The highest version was witnessed in that course using a group work strategy rather than traditional methods ([Parveen, Mahmood, Mahmood, & Arif, 2011](#)).

[Stahl and VanSickle \(1992\)](#) wrote a book related to group work. It has been highlighted that social studies instructors should blend the group work approach with their traditional instructional practices to make the group work approach effective and their instruction easy. Social studies teachers think that the group

work approach is beneficial and should be integrated into every classroom (Nowell, 2017). In their opinion, cooperation should be one of the habits of learners and instructors. Therefore, group work should be expected in every classroom and integrated with most subjects by blending different teaching methods.

Methods and Materials

The current work is a qualitative study using a hermeneutic phenomenology study design. (Lydall, Pretorius, & Stuart, 2005). The study incorporated this method to elicit the beliefs and experiences of social studies teachers regarding managing group work. With the help of this approach, we can interpret what teachers think about group work, their part in the management of cooperative learning and the challenges they face during this process.

Elite Schools of Lahore were selected as the research sites. Three schools were selected after taking their consent for participation in the study. All these schools were in the vicinity of Johar Town. This study employed a criterion sampling technique which yielded 5 primary school teachers as the participants of the study (Patton, 2015). In this sampling technique, requirements are set earlier, and then the sample is selected accordingly. It is essential to give a thought while we choose the criteria to obtain data according to our objectives and the research problem. These conditions are incorporated to decide the inclusion of contributors in this study:

- 1) The participant had to be social studies teachers.
- 2) The participant must be teaching in an elite school.
- 3) The participant must be willing to participate.
- 4) The participant must have at least one year of teaching experience.

In the current study, semi-structured discussions were piloted to assemble information. Semi-structured interviews help to generate open communication with the participants. It is used to get open-ended

answers from the participants to make our study reliable and authentic (Pathak & Inratat, 2012). The interviews were conducted in the selected schools with the consent of both the management and the social studies teacher. All the interviews were recorded. Two digital audio recording devices were incorporated to document the discussions. In addition, the dialogue guide was used to take notes whenever it was deemed necessary to do so.

All interview recordings were transcribed and translated into the English language for analysis purposes. The qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts provided a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences and perspectives. This step in the data analysis was more like a cross-case analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

Findings

Social studies teachers have a different perspective on group work and its management. Regarding the beliefs about group work, all the participants think that group work is suitable for primary students. "Whether to teach the subject in groups or not is by and large dependent upon the content of a particular topic. However, in most cases, if not all, group work strategies suffice (Participant 2).

Only one participant believes that group work is ideal for every level of students; no specific grade is required. About the benefits of group work, every participant thinks that group work is a constructive approach that brings responsibility, cooperation, engagement, and social skills.

Group work can help students understand complex topics easily as teachers divide them among students. The teachers can manage their time, and students can develop a strong understanding of a topic; they can create a habit of cooperation and sharing their knowledge. Students can build communication skills and create an inclusive environment (Participant 1).

Most of the participant feels that training on conducting group work, especially in diverse classrooms, will elevate the pressure to some

extent, and most of the challenges will be addressed on their own

Conducting group work is itself a task. Designing tasks that are aligned to students' objectives, planning assessments that not only evaluate their individual performances but group roles, navigating them through conflicts and providing them with timely feedback while managing time and keeping track of other activities often become too laborious for teachers. Only trained teachers can successfully perform the task. (Participant 5)

Teachers have mixed opinions on the organization and structure of the groups. Most of them opined that heterogeneous or randomly selected groups comprising 4 to 5 students are preferable for social studies classrooms and are easily manageable. In addition to that, instructional objectives and the content of the topic generally sets the tone for group work.

I think instructional objectives decide how groups are organized. Still, in my opinion, it should be the student's choice because when students are interested and motivated to work in groups, it will be beneficial for the students. Giving priority to their choices will make them motivated and active to work and learn. (Participant 5)

Teachers have divided opinions on whether or not to have students' say while deciding on the strategies. Teachers favoured taking students' concerns and opined that when the students are empowered to decide whether they want to work in groups or not and have been told the benefits of working in groups, they usually will choose a group setting and feel enthusiastic. Not taking their opinion may turn the tables in some cases.

Allow brainstorming, ask questions, and choose a solution that is acceptable for more students. Talking with students and giving them freedom and discussion will help manage small issues and conflicts among students. Sometimes giving students time and space can resolve their problems. (Student 5)

Group work is challenging; most participants responded that time management,

teacher motivation, and students' behaviour toward their group members are the main challenges of group work. Students' motivation is a significant characteristic of group work.

Time management is the biggest challenge. Usually, we are unable to complete a topic on time due to this strategy. Students usually show bad behaviour because they don't want to work with new students. They don't want to share their things with them; they sometimes have low motivation and don't feel like studying. (Participant 4)

Diversity and individual differences among the students were identified as another challenge that teachers face while assigning group work to the students, especially during their assessments. Teachers think that

Students are difficult to manage when there arises a clash between personalities. They quarrel, are not willing to work without their friends and are distracted too often by environmental noise and hence making things complicated enough for the teacher to handle the group work and the academic activities simultaneously. (Participant 3)

Most of the teachers opined that if teachers are properly trained, managing differences is not difficult; however, it requires ample patience and composure. Digging deeper into students' personalities and knowing their personal traits usually provide teachers with insight into how they should be dealt with.

Bear me on this, but the differences are there. Whether the teacher is teaching using some traditional technique or she is using inquiry-based learning, trying some hands-on activities with her students, their personalities are reflected in their work, and so does their behaviour. Our task is not just to get done with the academic objective but to provide them with the tools with which they can navigate through these differences. They can channel their opinion and teach when and how to vent their emotions. Managing it in the group is not otherwise, but the teacher should have a keen eye for her students. (Participant 4)

Also, teachers lack a fair deal of knowledge while assessing performances in groups and on

an individual level. Most of them could only think of traditional means of assessment that have been fruitful in a traditional setting but are not very useful otherwise. However, when evaluating individuals as per the diversity of the class was discussed, almost all of the teachers opined that evaluating each student individually as per the diversity in class makes it laborious for the teachers and hence lowers the bar.

Group work cannot be fairly assessed as diverse students make one group, and evaluating each cannot be fair every time. Students have different attitudes and behaviours that cannot be controlled. Teachers have to be very careful in evaluation, but still, everything is not always the same and perfect. (Participant 5)

Though teachers find group works very challenging to conduct, none of them denied the efficacy of the strategy while teaching complex and lengthy topics. Given students are motivated, they easily manage to learn even the most complex topics with the help of their class fellows` under the supervision of their teachers. "The complexities involved don't simply overshadow the effectiveness of conducting a group work" (Participant 3).

Discussion

This qualitative study opted to explore the beliefs and practices of social studies teachers of elite schools concerning the management of group work in the classroom. The underlined theory of this study was the Vygotsky theory of social learning (zone of proximal development) which highlights the process of social interaction and its advantages among individuals. The study's findings revolve around six themes: beliefs, skills, structure, role of teacher, challenges, and assessment of group work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore these themes.

This study found that social studies teachers find team works fruitful and dynamic for students and 21st-century teachers. They reported that they often use the group work approach with confidence. Most teachers support training programs to improve the skills of teachers regarding group work. Social

studies teachers believe that students need a lot of support from teachers to make group work successful. Findings suggested that teachers should act as a coach and support students. Teachers think that it is challenging for teachers to handle sometimes as teachers have to be very careful in dealing with students with different ability students in groups.

The findings of this study have some resemblance with the past literature. It will also contribute to the future literature as the perspectives of social studies teachers about group work have been explored. [Gillies and Ashman \(2003\)](#) discussed group work, its structure, and teachers' role and duties in managing groups. The facts discussed in this book are pretty similar to our results. The outcomes of this study are in line with the work of [Abramczyk and Jurkowski \(2020b\)](#), which shows that teachers feel that group work is constructive for building social and cooperative skills among students. Teachers think that it is very effective for students' academic success and learning. The statement that teachers face during their group management aligns with the study of [Buchs, Filippou, Pulfrey, and Volpé \(2017b\)](#). Teachers concluded that group work is not easy to apply and is a very demanding approach. [Forsell, Forslund Frykedal, and Chiriac \(2021\)](#) conducted a study regarding the challenges of group work. Its findings suggest that group work is a challenging approach in assessment and evaluation as teachers consider that individual review is easier to handle than group assessment. Research shows that a lack of fairness in assessment in group work is due to a shortage of time and students' participation in groups. Teachers feel that group assessments lack justice and equality in class ([Patterson, 2019](#)).

Le, Janssen, and Wubbels's (2018) research are similar to our study on group work obstacles. It stated that teachers and students and students face problems like observing students, dividing tasks, and evaluating them. This study also assessed the student's responses to group work, and it shows that students often complain about their groups and their peers. They sometimes find it challenging to work at

an equal pace with their peers; this result is similar to the quantitative effects of Šerić and Garbin Praničević (2018b), that students are not satisfied and motivated to work in groups. They think that they can do better when they work alone.

The focus of the study was on social studies teachers' perceptions, so the study found out that there were no particular strategies that teachers consider necessary to manage group work in class. The significant finding of the study is the perspective of teachers regarding group work. This study discovers that teachers are fond of the group work approach as it has become the need of our classroom culture and our course of study. The study also indicated that group work raises efficiency among pupils and make them lifelong learner. A quantitative survey conducted on teachers' perceptions regarding group work has similar views to the finding of our study (Alias et al., 2018). The discussion proves that group work is a creative and engaging strategy for 21st-century teachers and students to become active and social beings. They can interact with peers and develop a sense of belonging and relations with their classmates. This approach can help them to adapt to the changing environment and deal with different situations.

This study is limited to social studies teachers and elite schools. Participants of the study were limited due to the current scenario of Covid-19, and I was able to collect data from only two institutions. Future research can be enhanced in public schools, and several subjects can be considered in terms of group

work for broader perspectives. No particular strategies for managing group work in social studies classrooms were identified in this study so that future researchers can investigate in different disciplines and at various institutions. The results of this study are helpful for the policymakers to develop new policies for teachers to overcome the challenges they face during group work. The study results indicate that government and curriculum developers should provide flexibility in the social studies curriculum so teachers can easily manage group work.

Conclusion

This qualitative study concludes that group work is a general and rich approach often used by social studies teachers in elite schools. It highlights that training plays a significant role in managing and applying the group work approach at every level of education. The study's findings state that social studies teachers face many challenges in managing group work, and students also complain about their dissatisfaction with their group members. However, it is also noted that group work increases efficiency and productivity in students and makes the classroom an interactive place to study. Moreover, it is emphasized that the group work approach is highly recommended and demanding for 21st-century teachers and students. It is hoped that this study will voice the problems that teachers and students face while managing and working in groups.

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