

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

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**Title:** Developing Effective Student Collaboration

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**Year:** 2010-2011

**School/Grade:** H. C. Crittenden Middle School, Grade 6

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SUMMARY OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context**

As a sixth grade science teacher, I wanted to delve into the issue of how to improve the effectiveness of peer collaboration in the classroom. My original research question was: “What methods of collaboration are most effective and engaging for our students?” This question was chosen because both my research partner and I believe in the idea that student learning will be more successful and long-lasting when the students are involved in and more responsible for their own learning. Peer collaboration in the classroom is one of the best ways to produce student involvement.

**Action Plan**

In order to immerse ourselves in the current pedagogy surrounding the topic, my research partner and I began reading peer reviewed journal articles about collaboration. These articles focused on content area reading vocabulary, use of collaboration when choosing learning objectives and choosing exemplars, interconnecting ideas to improve thinking, taking on specific roles within collaborative groups, techniques to influence productive group work / group processing, how to ensure individual and group accountability, and the use of active listening strategies within collaborative groups. As we researched we noticed that the literature supported the idea that if students practiced certain active listening skills—encourage, restate or clarify, reflect or paraphrase, summarize—they would be better equipped to clarify and thereby validate their input to group members during collaboration by paraphrasing the ideas of the group. This would inherently encourage student participation by validating ideas synthesized by the group.

**Beginning Results and More Action**

We collected data through Likert scale surveys and short response questionnaires given to a 5% sample of six grade science students. Our first Likert scale survey assessed the students’ preferences for group size, type of task and method for sharing ideas. From this first piece of data collection, we found that the students overwhelmingly thought that sharing ideas with others was more valuable than hearing ideas being shared. We thought this was interesting and wanted to know more from

the students, so we created another survey that allowed students to elaborate on the reasons for their ideas. Instead of using a Likert scale to find out about preferences, we reformatted the survey into short answer to discover not only what the students' preferences were, but also the reasons for their preferences. We found that most of students believed that they learned more by sharing their own ideas rather than listening to the ideas of others. For example, one student said, "Kids only want to hear what they have to say," and another student said, "It is harder to stay interested when listening."

From these second survey results we further validated the idea that students preferred to share their ideas over listening to ideas and also found they felt it was easier to focus while sharing rather than just listening. We hypothesized one problem could be that students are not truly engaged when listening to what others in the group are saying due to lack of focus.

## **Results**

From this idea of students not being able to focus while listening, we referred to research from chapter 5 of *Productive Group Work* (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). This educational information was published on the ASCD website. The chapter contained information about the enhancement of interpersonal and small group skills and put forth the idea that "to interact with a group and build on each others ideas, students must be able to listen and understand their groupmates. Active listening is a system of techniques for focusing the listener, encouraging the speaker, and ensuring the listener understands what the speaker has said." We found in this article a list of techniques to improve active listening skills, and from this list we developed another student-centered survey, which was administered to the same sample group as the two prior surveys. We used this to find out what active listening techniques, if any, students were utilizing during collaborative group work. Through this third survey, we determined that the majority of students weren't paraphrasing what other students had said in order to clearly connect their new ideas to the group's understanding of the discussion topic. In addition, students also revealed that they weren't asking for clarification when something came up that they didn't understand.

## **Implications**

The main conclusion we have drawn from our action research so far is that in order to make student collaboration as effective as possible, we need to help our students develop methods to focus on ideas that they hear as much as they focus on what they are saying themselves. Listening to others is just as important to their group work as sharing their own ideas.

We recommend future research to discover techniques that can be used to develop active listening skills in order to enable students to synthesize all ideas presented during collaboration.

A wondering we have is how students are to be held responsible for utilizing active listening strategies in a way that will reveal the effectiveness of those strategies to the students. Next year, we hope to implement assignments where students will be required to document their use of active listening strategies during and after collaborative group work.