

GROUP LEARNING IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND
TRAINING

by

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Research essay

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

in the

FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND NURSING

at the

RAND AFRIKAANS UNIVERSITY

SUPERVISOR: Prof SJ GRAVETT

December 1998

(ii)

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband Madumetja Gilbert for being such a source of inspiration, and for his encouragement, and my children Mate, Mashela and Mahlogonolo, whom I have sacrificed at the expenses of my work.



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Acknowledgement

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the following, who made the completion of this study possible:

- * My supervisor, Dr. Sarah Gravett who, while supervising with all her patience, also served as my library.
- * The literacy teacher , Mr Mothiba and the participants in the Tzaneen Technical College who were involved in this study, for their kind cooperation and willingness to help.
- * My uncle Ephraim, my sisters Motswapo, Motlatso and Mapeu who continually encouraged me to complete my studies.
- * All my friends and colleagues of Hwiti High School in particular Seipati, Maki and Benny, who showed a lot of interest in my work and assisted me.
- *The librarians, RAU, UNISA and the University of Pretoria for the assistance they offered
- * Dr. Liz Greyling, for sacrificing her time to edit this script.
- * My parents, who took care of my children during my long travel to RAU.
- * My learners at Hwiti High School, who cooperated with the relieve teachers during my short absence to RAU.
- * Finally, my typist, who had to struggle with my illegible handwriting to make this study a success.

ABSTRACT

Recent literature and current views on group learning in adult education support the idea that an adult classroom, where learner centred methods such as group learning are used, is often very productive and permits a critical approach to knowledge by adults.

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which group learning group is used in an ABET centre in Tzaneen in the Northern Province. In order to achieve this aim, a qualitative method of data collection was used to determine the possible implications for literacy programmes in South Africa. The empirical data were obtained via observation and was analysed by unitising, categorising and patterning to arrive at the research findings.

The following are the main research findings:

- * Currently group learning is not practised effectively in the ABET center of the Northern Province because of the following:
- * The teacher seems not to understand how and why group learning should be implemented.
- * Learners are not exposed to social and interpersonal skills which are important for the functioning of group learning.
- * Group learning was introduced too late in the academic year, which made it difficult for the learners to cope well with the group learning methods.

The following are the main implications of the study:

- * There is a need for training teachers to be familiar with the group learning approach and the methods for practising group learning in ABET.
- * Group learning methods would be productive if introduced in the early part of the academic year.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the utilisation of group learning when teaching adult learners. It specifically, reports on an investigation of the extent to which group learning is used and implemented in an Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) centre in the Northern Province and how it is implemented. The investigation is undertaken at the time when South Africa, and more specifically, the Northern Province is experiencing political, social, economic and educational pressure to change (Times, 1998:5).

Firstly, a brief background to the problem will be discussed. This will be followed by my assumptions and presuppositions as a researcher. Relevant literature will also be reviewed. Lastly, the research design and methodology will be outlined, followed by the findings of the study.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

2.1 Background to the problem



The ABET policy (1997:40) states that one of the teaching and learning encounters that practitioners should promote in adult education is collaboration and group learning methods. Practitioners are encouraged to by all means move away from methods that are teacher-centred to learner-centred methods. It is argued that adult learners need an approach which is characterised by dialogue and collaboration. Such an approach will, *inter alia*, draw on adult learners' accumulated experience and equip them with problem-solving skills. Furthermore, it is viewed as very important that adult educators use group learning when teaching adult learners because it helps learners to discuss the learning experiences among themselves and improve their language competency.

Another issue that comes into play regarding the utilisation of group learning when teaching adult learners is the new curriculum framework and the matching qualification framework (the National Qualification Framework- NQF) which have adopted an outcomes-based approach to education and training. It is believed that these frameworks will best serve the transformation and the

integration of education and training system of South Africa (ABET Policy, 1997:27). This approach to education promulgates teaching as more than the mere transferring of knowledge to learners who are not required to memorize lots of information any longer. From an outcomes-based education (OBE) approach, group learning and teaching is centered around learners where learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught (Nuan, 1988, in Huerta-Macias, 1993, no page). The statement is confirmed by Lehoko, (in Education Africa Forum 1998:36), who emphasises the importance of OBE being a move as away from the teacher talking, leaving learners as passive listeners. In this regard, Freire (1990, in Shor, 1995:29) argued that the learner-centred approach does eradicate the notion of the teacher of the student and the students of the teacher. This notion ceases to exist and a new term which is teacher student with student-teacher emerges. However, this does not mean that the teacher does not have anything worthwhile to say to learners. The focus simply shifts from the teacher being the only one who tells, leaving the learners to sit and listen passively, to the learners participating in the lesson (Mckay, 1995: 79). It indicates that both the teacher and the learner have joint responsibility in the learning process through an ongoing dialogue.

It can thus be stated that there is a growing interest in collaborative models, as current research evidence reveals group learning to be a promising method for improving not only academic instruction, but social skills as well (Adams, Carlson & Hamm 1990:9). Nichols in The Transvaal United African Teacher's Association (TUATA) (1998:12) newsletter supports the abovementioned statement by releasing an article reflecting on group learning as the wave of the future in education.

However, I have been involved in the teaching of adult learners in the semi rural area of Mankweng in the Northern Province. In my experience, most practitioners in adult learning centres do not make use of the group learning method as they are still entrenched in the traditional teaching method. Therefore, I thought it necessary to conduct an investigation at a particular learning centre on whether the group learning method is practised or not and if it is so, how it is implemented.

2.2 Statement of the problem

Against the preceding background, the problem investigated in this study can be formulated as follows :

- * To what extent is the group learning method practised in an ABET centre of the Northern Province?
- * If group learning is used how is it implemented?

3. AIM

In view of the stated problem, the aim of the study is to explore the extent to which group learning is used and implemented in an ABET centre in the Northern Province. The findings of the study can be of use for informing ABET teaching.

4. ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

I would like to make the following acknowledgements before I provide an outline of the assumptions and presuppositions. I am aware of the fact that scientific research discourages researchers from making assumptions and presuppositions that may lead to prediction and consequently influence the research findings. The researcher may be tempted to find literature and empirical data that will support his/her assumptions and presuppositions. The scientific research suggests that the investigator should preferably enter the world of participants without any fixed agenda and predetermined responses. However, it is my belief that researchers cannot detach themselves from the particular research. Therefore, it is important that researchers should state their assumptions and presuppositions. This section deals with my assumptions and presuppositions.

My first assumption is that I regard the concept of group learning as a strategy which is very beneficial to adult learners. I personally view group learning in adult classes as a method which could be used when teaching adult learners because it engages learners in the learning activity. Learners are actively involved in the learning activity through dialogue with the educator and peer

group members. This involves learners taking responsibility of their own learning by feeling committed to the task given, looking for the material which will help them to tackle a problem, and also struggle to get the task done.

Group learning does not only make learners responsible for their own learning , but also contribute to the development of social and interpersonal skills. This has come to my notice when I was involved with adult learners who have learned to respect contributions made by other learners, even if the contributions differed from one's understanding. Learners do support and help one another in solving academic as well as family problems.

In my opinion, peer support is one important factor in as far as group work is concerned. If adult learners could create a supportive spirit in class, chances are a conducive learning environment will prevail which will ultimately encourage adult learners to participate more in group discussions. Peer support is not only important in as far as effective learning is concerned, it also leads to improved retention. I further presuppose that group learning contributes to the enhancement of self esteem. Once an adult learner could have a positive self esteem, then the positive self concept of the learner will be enhanced and I assume that learning will take place. I finally presuppose that adult learners prefer group learning method to repetitive learning strategy which encourages competition among learners. I therefore believe that group learning activities could foster the development of positive peer relationships among adult learners.

5. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

5.1 Introduction

In order to illuminate the research problem, the literature review of this essay will explore group learning and cooperative learning as discussed in the literature. The exploration of group learning will include a definition of the concepts group learning and cooperative learning. Using group learning with adult learners will also be explored. Lastly, the role of the facilitator in group work and the method for practising group work in the classroom will be discussed.

5.2 Definition of concepts

When exploring the literature, two terms are found which involve learners working together in a group, namely cooperative learning and group learning. From the reviewed literature the concept of group learning is sometimes used to denote specific types of group learning namely: cooperative learning, collaborative learning and transformative learning. The terms group learning and cooperative learning can be used interchangeably: “ In fact your ability to use group learning will be extremely useful when you introduce students to cooperative learning” (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Kauchar, Pendagrass, Keogh, & Gibson, 1990 :262). Mention of one term implies the use of the other. Consequently, in this study the two terms will also be used interchangeably.

5.2.1 The concept of cooperative learning

According to Hilke (1990:8), cooperative learning is defined as an organisational structure in which a group of learners pursues academic goals through collaboration efforts. Learners work together in small groups draw on each other’s strength, and assist each other in completing a task.

5.2.2 The concept group learning

According to Imel (1997:1), “ a group can be an environment in which people invent and explore symbolic structures for understanding the world, learning from each other and trying out for themselves the discourse of the domain of knowledge they seek to acquire”. Learners join together to accomplish a learning goal. Functionally, therefore, the two terms are the same and will be used interchangeably.

5.2.3 Using group learning with adult learners

In this section, one argues why group learning is important when working with adult learners. Secondly, the structure of group learning will be explored and lastly, group learning methods will

be discussed.

According to Vella (1994 :53), adult learners need to be creative and knowledgeable to be able to cope with the demands of the environment in which they find themselves. To stimulate their thinking to a level which will enable them to fend for themselves outside the classroom, they need a discussion inside the classroom. This implies dividing them into small groups and giving them a learning task, which should be in the form of open ended-questions. These questions do not have predetermined responses but invite critical reflection, analysis, review and personal perception (Vella, 1995 :38). This type of questions sustain the dialogue among the learners.

I further want to argue that group learning is important to adult learners because it contributes to an environment which is conducive to learning. When working together in groups learners feel free to voice their opinions without any fear of either being listened to by the teacher or the whole class. When the learning environment does not appear to be secure for adult learners, they will either withdraw from the class or portray resistance to learning. Therefore, efforts should be made to create a secure environment by respecting each others' contribution, calling them by their names, asking what their expectations of a learning programme are, providing regular feedback on the learning process and lastly by reaffirming their contributions. If learners could experience security in their learning process, regular attendance will be noted (Vella, 1995:188 and Imel 1994 no page). I believe that the small group provides a secure environment where adult learners can practise freedom and feel free to voice their opinions. This statement is affirmed by Vella, (1995:191), when she says, “ the small group is a place to practise freedom, autonomy, cooperative and mutual acceptance”.

Apart from small groups providing a safe environment, adult learners also become independent learners when discussing and controlling their learning activities. This ultimately makes them responsible for their own learning. Each adult learner could reach the highest level of participation because they will feel they are in control and responsible for their classroom activities.

I further assert that while learners are engaged in a dialogue, taking control of their own learning

and the learning content, and contributing to the group, their thoughts become clarified and refined by talking. Those who are listening have the opportunity to think of alternatives and to finally produce knowledge which will make them proud.

In addition, another issue to consider when working with adult learners is the experience which learners have accumulated through their lives. According to Vella, (1995:20), Gravett,(1997:45) and Greyling (1998:22), learners' experience enable them to engage in dialogue with their educators and co-learners. In this way, they are able to learn new concepts, attitudes or skills which relate to their experience. Learning from experience becomes easy and interesting when adult learners are divided into small groups of four or three, discuss a topic and indicate their agreement and disagreement on facts until they reach consensus. This does not mean that the teacher should be quiet. The teacher's task is to make it a point of guiding learners towards a topic and to help find a solution to the problem. It should be acknowledged that the resource material on which the topic is based is the experience of the adult learners themselves, and that they have different experiences because they emerge from different backgrounds.

It is clear that the team spirit, rather than individual rivalry, is emphasized as learners learn and work together in a mixed ability group to accomplish a learning goal. Adult learners need an approach which is characterised by dialogue and cooperation especially because they fear that competition will discourage those learners who are not performing well. This is an indication that it is necessary to use group learning for competition to be replaced by collaborative learning. Galbrain, (1991:in Gravett, 1997;28) confirms that adult learners need a strategy of teaching which is characterised by collaboration. Building teams in the classroom makes it easier for the learners to understand the learning content and to attach meaning to it. This is unlike the individual teaching strategy which is teacher-centred, and ends up having made learners not contributing to their learning. Vella, (in Gravett 1997:32) confirms this statement by indicating that, the teacher-centred method which she calls "banking" concept will in the long run shy away learners through its lack of creativity, transformation and knowledge.

Group learning could be used to help slow, disadvantaged and high potential learners, especially because in most of the regular classes teachers are unable to provide constant support and feedback to learners who struggle or are highly gifted. With group work, learners receive peer

help and encouragement. However, not only disadvantaged learners will benefit from group learning activities. High potential learners will also benefit significantly from group learning techniques. Adams, et al. (1990:4); McKay (1998) and Hilke (1990) affirm this statement by indicating that group work enhances the less competent learners's own understanding of the concept or topic under discussion. Comenius (in Pederson, 1995:86) maintains that learners would benefit by both teaching and being taught by other students, as they do not fear the teacher exposing their views to their inmates who will in turn support and correct one another.

Contrary to the team spirit mentioned in the above paragraph, is the individual's competitive spirit which is prevailing in some of the adult centres where I am involved. In such centres, where individualised teaching is mostly used, one learner's success makes it difficult for others to succeed. Each learner is expected to work alone at his or her own pace, to complete an assignment. With this approach, the individual himself/herself is responsible for completing a task. "There is no correlation among participants' goal attainments, individuals perceive that they reach their goals of whether other individuals attain or do not attain their goals" (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1992 :175). The method disadvantages those learners who are naturally sociable to work in isolation, struggling to piece together fragments of information. With individualised learning, the goal or task objective is usually perceived as most important, with each learner having to achieve the objective, while in group learning all learners benefit from one another which will encourage and motivate the learners Adams, et al. (1990:6). When using individualised teaching, the teacher is the main source of assistance and reinforcement, while in group teaching the teacher and the learner are partners in the learning activity. The danger of solitary learning is that it completes only one part of the learning picture, and learners are deprived of the power of collaboration (Adams, et al. 1990 :11).

In contrast to group learning, the competition spirit (a competitive atmosphere) induces anxiety, fear of failure and ultimately withdrawal of some learners who are not competitive enough. (Adams, et al. 1990:9), "Anxiety is one of the most pervasive barriers to productivity and positive interpersonal relationship in adult classrooms. It leads to egocentric preoccupation with oneself, disruption of cognitive reasoning and also avoidance of the situation one fears" (Pederson and Digby, 1995:20). Based on the above statement, one can argue that many adult

centres will experience withdrawal of learners where competition spirit still prevails.

Group learning is beneficial to adult learners because it promotes active learning in a way not possible with competitive or individualised learning. In group learning, the teacher organises the learning activities around tasks, problems and projects that learners can work through in small mixed ability groups. Lessons are designed around active learning teams so that learners can combine energies as they reach for a common goal. Group learning gives learners a chance to mesh their individual goals with a group goal through a process called positive interdependence (Adams, et al. 1990:14). This means that each learner's individual objective is met while at the same time the group meets its goal. It also depicts that the success of the group depends on individual efforts. Learners need to fulfil their own objectives for the benefit of the entire group (Hilke, 1990:10). Positive interdependence motivates even the slow achievers in the group to do their best. Therefore, it is important to use the group learning strategy in adult centres to enhance the learning activities. In their research when comparing the results of a class which has been taught using the whole class method, Sharan and Shacher (1988:10), found that students from the cooperative group displayed less competitive behaviour than when teaching the class as a whole.

Up to now, I have argued in favour of cooperative learning based on peer support when compared to individualised learning or the competitive spirit. Another reason why cooperative learning is important when working with adult learners is that it has a positive impact where self-esteem is concerned. Self-esteem is a judgement of oneself and one's experiences (Hohnson and Norem - Hebeisen, in Pederson, 1995:119). Cooperative efforts promote higher self-esteem than competitive or individualistic efforts (Johnson and Johnson in Pederson 1995,120). In a paper by Slavin (1988:21), it is indicated that the use of cooperative learning methods enhances a learner's self-esteem. Once an adult learner's self-esteem is enhanced, a positive self-concept will normally be the result. A positive self-concept will enable a learner to develop confidence and motivate him/her to continue learning. This statement is confirmed by research conducted by Pederson (1995:121) which indicates that in cooperative group efforts learners realise that they are known, accepted, and liked by their peers and that they know they have contributed to their own, others' and the group's success. On the other hand, Shirley (1990:6) indicates that if adult

learners portray low self-esteem, coupled with a lack of progress in academic activities the practitioner will experience adult learners dropping out. To be able to prevent that, the teacher, together with other co-teachers should make a point of supporting adult learners with low self-esteem. They will then feel good about themselves and progress well in their learning activities. The teacher should therefore devise programmes which will cater for adult learners' needs, treat them with respect, give them the opportunity to participate in the formulation of what is to be learned, and lastly, provide adult learners with tools to help them to become independent learners.

Participation in group learning also contributes to improved critical thinking. According to Knox (1978:446), critical thinking could be described as the ability to interpret data, weigh evidence and engage in deductive thinking. Adult learners need to acquire critical thinking skills which will help to question certain important issues. The democratic environment in which they find themselves is in need of people who do not just take things for granted. Adult learners need to listen to what other adult learners are saying and then make decisions. Adults need to show maturity by deciding whether things are true or not true. Each adult learner should construct the best understanding of the world around him or her and be able to take the correct step at the appropriate time.

In the preceding paragraph, I argued for the importance of group learning which includes critical thinking. Another critical issue in group learning (when working with adult learners) is to help adults to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner. This statement is confirmed by Cheryl (1988 no page no), in a paper he delivered on the importance of computers in adult education. He pointed out that the ability to solve problems is important to adult learners because it enhances skills needed by most professionals who engage in self-directed learning. This method calls for small groups of students working at a specific problem in the study field. Members of the group define exactly what the problem is, then propose alternative solutions for the problem, and explore the consequences of each of the given alternatives.

Cooperative learning groups give learners an opportunity to find a solution to a specific problem or tasks given. Group members who can use negotiating and problem-solving skills could help

those without the necessary skills to solve the problem. Adult learners need this type of strategy to help solve problems in their respective families. Educators and parents have also found problem approaches to be helpful in dealing with classroom and family conflict (McKay, 1995, Gordon and Burch, in Adams, et al.1990:16). Learners develop a sense of helping one another through active participation and above all, academic participation is increased. This does always happen and depends on the subject and topic of the lesson. In their results on research which was conducted when comparing the effect of cooperative group instruction to competitive or individualistic forms of instructions, Sharan and Shachar (1988:1) found that cooperative learning yielded better results.

5.2 Basic elements the teacher should consider when planning for group learning

The preceding section outlined and discussed the importance of cooperative learning when working with adult learners. This section will focus on the issues the teacher should consider when planning for group learning. This includes the teacher explaining why it is important to learn in groups and educating adult learners the rules for interaction in a group.

For group work to be effectively used in an adult centre, teachers should prepare learners for group work. This includes, among other things, explaining to the learners the importance of engaging in group learning activities, rules for interaction and, lastly, the role of the teacher in monitoring the group.

Learners need to know that when engaged in small group interaction they have the an opportunity of testing their voices and ideas within a small group which is not frightening. I have realised that learners tend to be free to voice their opinions in small groups than in the whole class. Gravett, (1997:43), also mentions that learners tend to express their problems and misunderstandings more readily in small group than in a large group. Learners become more independent within small learning groups. They also become responsible for the learning outcomes.

It is also important to explain to the learners that small group interaction provides them the

opportunity to explore and clarify their thoughts about the topic of discussion. In the discussion process those learners who will be listening will be granted an opportunity of reflecting on the information they have acquired and reexamine ideas they have accumulated. The learner might need to change his/her perception of things.

Group learning is beneficial to adult learners because it gives learners an opportunity to hold discussions about the topics they are busy with in class. According to Gravett, (1997:44) group discussions help with questions posed by the teacher which are based on the assigned reading. During discussions learners are able to help one another to assess the information which is relevant to the topic in question. In addition, learners can assist each other with summarising the main points either in a text or from a lecture.

In the process of discussing the problem posed to the group, clarity about the problem is obtained because it has been shared among the group members. This will result in more insight into the problem. At times it is possible for a learner to identify the learning problem of another learner because they are more closer to one another than they are to the teacher. Therefore, group learning is beneficial to adult learners.

Up to now I have argued about the information the teacher should explain to his/her learners before engaging in group learning in order to explain the importance of group learning. In the following paragraph I shall discuss how the learners should interact with one another in a discussion group.

Learners need to be aware of the fact that for a successful group functioning to take place, all group members should sit either in a circle or a semi circle form. This is done to allow facilitation within the group Gravett (1997); Adams,et al. (1990:25) also indicate that the desks must be pushed together in small groups or replaced with small tables to facilitate group functioning.

Learners should be informed that the successful interaction within the group depends on the accountability of the group members. This means that individuals should take responsibility for their own learning. Each member of the group should contribute to the group and master the

learning material because the success of the group depends on individual contributions. On the other hand the teacher should explain to the learners that it is acceptable to be quiet at times moreover that one has to think before one speaks. It is advisable for learners to be aware of the importance of social skills when working in a group because learners from different backgrounds with different life experiences will make differing contributions which must be respected by members of the group. Respect of ones views will give adult learners confidence to contribute to the group. Gravett (1997:35) mentions that respect in an educational environment means to value the integrity of the other person. The integrity of each learner will be preserved if learners could be taught not to humiliate one another. Humiliation can demotivate learners from attending classes.

The teacher should also indicate that it is normal to disagree with a co-learner's contribution, but one should not just disagree without providing reasons for argument. For any disagreement alternative answers should be provided. Slow learners need to be given a chance to voice their opinions and should be supported without being laughed at. It is important for the adult learner to be aware that there are talkative or extroverts learners who may want to dominate the discussion. Such learners may often interrupt while other learners are speaking. They need to be aware that other group members should also be given a chance to speak.

Another important factor to be exposed to the learners working in a group is for the group members to be aware that they should share the leadership of the group. This means that many roles must be performed by group members. Each member of the group should take the responsibility for making sure that group members work towards a goal. Members should take positions of scribe, time keeper and a leader. These positions should. Every member should have a turn to occupy each of these positions.

So far, I have argued about the rules for interaction in planning group learning. I also want to point out that before learners could break into various groups, the teacher should explain the learning task so that learners are clear of what is expected of them. This means that should be sure of the work that need to be covered, and also the outcomes of the discussion. The teacher may ask learners some questions to test if they understood the task. According to Mckay

(1998:106), learners should be asked specific questions about what they will do to test their understanding of the task.

The teacher should not only prepare the learner for group interaction skills, but also monitor the effectiveness of cooperative learning groups. This could be done by the teacher moving around to all the groups in class, listening and observing the level of participation. Skills such as interpersonal, small and learning should be assessed by the teacher. In the event where such skills are not being practised, the teacher should intervene. Some times it may be necessary to clarify the instructions or even review important procedures and strategies outlined earlier on. The teacher should not be tempted to give answers to any group. "The teacher should wait and allow learners to grapple with an academic or social skill problems and to allow the group to find a solution to the problem" (McKay, et al.1998:107).

Assessing the learning and getting learners to reflect on their work is an important point not to be overlooked during the monitoring. According to McKay,et al. (1998:107), the teacher should give learners a wide variety of assessment to see what and how they have learned. This could be done by either asking verbal questions or by written exercise.

In addition to the above, the teacher should give learning tasks which link with previous learning of adult learners. "Adult learners learn better if the new work to be taught links with their previous knowledge" Gravett (1997:46). They come to class with accumulated experience, which in one way or another needs to correlate with the new content to be learned. If the learning content to be taught does not link with their previous experience, learning problems might arise. It is therefore important for the teacher to relate what is being learned with prior learning experiences. Hilke (1990 : 13) mentions that the teacher might need to define key terminology and concepts and relate them to prior learning experience. This will add to comprehension and retention when the group begins to work on its own. Objectives of the lesson should be clearly explained to learners before they divide into groups. Material to be used should be provided.

A class needs time to get used to discussing ideas and people should to know each other. Learning will be inhibited if learners regard each other as strangers. Before a group can start

with a learning task, they need to be introduced to each other. Ice-breaking will possibly be necessary. The shy and quiet learners will benefit from such a situation. On the other hand, contributions made by learners in a group should be assessed by the teacher, otherwise learners will stop speaking.

In addition to the duties which should be performed by the teacher when structuring group learning activities, she needs to use vocabulary that can be understood by learners. Teachers should not attempt to impress learners with the knowledge they have. They should instead attempt to simplify the subject to the level of the learners. For this reason, the teacher should be able to see where learners experience difficulties. It should not be forgotten that all the above will take place only if learners are prepared to learn. The teacher can only make discussions work if learners are willing to take part (Mckay, 1995:106). This will be possible only if learners are convinced that the discussion will help them learn better. It means that the teacher has to ensure that something useful comes out of every discussion (Mckay 1995: 107). Important points should be considered so that learners can see what they have learned.

Among other things, the teacher needs to provide time for learners to grapple with the problems, try out strategies, discuss, experiment and evaluate information (Adams, et al. 1990: 9). Teachers need to model attitudes and to present themselves as problem- solvers and models of inquiry. This does not mean they should solve every problem learners are experiencing. Study strategies could be exposed to the learners or perhaps even to explain the problem clearly.

Teachers need to consider the goals and purpose of the group learning which will enable them to determine the size of the group. Recent research indicates that small groups are more effective (Greyling, 1998 :30) and Gravett (1997:42). Group memberships will thus be determined by the goal and the learning task of the learners. Long term projects need more time, while short term ones will need less time. The group composition will therefore depend on the given task.


5.4 Group learning tasks

Research in cooperative learning methods indicates that there are many completely different

methods for group learning. However, the methods involve learners working in small groups or teams to help one another study academic material. Group learning methods of minimise teacher domination of the class. It offers learners an opportunity to discuss information or practise skills originally presented by the teacher. The methods include student team-learning variations, the jig saw, learning together, team assistance, and individualisation and the task group method.

For the purpose of this study, the “task group method” is explored. This method will best suit an ABET level one class. It is adapted from McKay, (1995:111). According to this method the teacher needs time to prepare the topic for discussion before the lesson can start. The teacher needs to be completely sure about what goals are to be achieved and how one would go about achieving them. After this stage, the introduction of the topic or learning tasks takes place.

5.4.1 Introduction



The introduction of the lesson should only take a minute or two. At this stage, there is no need for a teacher to provide details about the subject matter, as this will be given as the explanation continues. The main purpose of this stage is to make learners understand what the task entails before they divide into groups. The introduction could also include a warm-up activity to enable learners to converse with each other. According to Vella (1994:17), the warm-up stage opens up dialogue between the learners and the educator.

5.4.2 Working individually

This stage could be optional depending on what the teacher plans for his/ her lesson to achieve. One could continue directly with the third stage which is working in pairs. I think it is necessary to start with each learner working alone for a few minutes. Vella (1994:47) confirms this statement by indicating that it is important for adult learners to work independently before joining other pairs of learners. This approach helps each and every adult learner to reflect alone on the theme, own thoughts or organise facts concerning the theme in his/her mind and enter the

discussion with some relevant points to talk about. This type of practice excludes those learners who cannot read or write. They could meditate about the theme without writing. This stage will help nervous and shy students to spend time to write or organise points and reflect on what they could contribute to the group. It soon becomes obvious to every one that quiet learners have as much to contribute as any one else, (Mckay 1995:13). Adult learners have much accumulated experience, and they need this stage to organise their facts first.

5.4.3 Working in pairs

Learners are grouped in pairs to discuss the theme. Shank, Cathy, Terrill and Linda (1995 no page), believe that it is necessary to group learners in pairs to work on a learning task. This method draws shy learners into the discussion. Being only two, the chance of avoiding talking is minimal. The advantage of small group learning is that it allows learners to think, speak freely and engage with the subject they know and practise. The teachers will work mostly around the groups, listening to the discussions and intervening where necessary. If this method is practised once or twice, the quieter learners in the group will find some of their ideas are taken seriously, while the noisier learners will begin to recognise that quieter classmates also have important ideas to contribute (Mckay, 1995:113). I assume that learners will form true friendships and that this will motivate them to attend classes regularly. This stage is optional. The teacher can either allow learners to work in pairs, or move directly to the following stage, which is working in small groups.

5.4.4 Working in small groups

Greyling (1998:30) indicates that discussion groups should not be too big. She estimated that four learners in a group will be sufficient because it will allow enough interaction among members of the group. This type of group work method results in the most productive discussions (Mckay, 1995:114). Learners are divided into groups to discuss a topic. Each member of the group can be given an assignment. According to Greyling (1998:30), one learner can be appointed as a writer for the group for that period of time. Another could be assigned the task of reporting, while still another one could do the drawing on the board when they report back.

Roles performed by each learner should be changed. This is done to involve all learners and, most importantly, learners will develop various skills. In some roles, learners are given the opportunity to take up positions of their own choice. For this reason, groups should not always consist of the same members. However, too many rapid changes will disrupt the learners from illustrating what aspect of their learning task they can perform best. It is also important to consider the group composition, which according to me, should consist of heterogeneous members. Miller and Verduin (1979 :94) confirm my statement by indicating that “ heterogeneous groups with varied backgrounds, interest and ideas, appears to be having most potential with greater experience and wider backgrounds present, more ideas can be suggested and interchanged, and more avenues for investigation can be established”. The teacher can join some of the groups although this may cause learners to deviate from their line of discussion. Points raised during the discussion could be written on a large sheet or on a flip chart. Learners on level one might find this difficult, but it is worth trying. After writing down their points, the group should agree on one learner to report to the whole class.

5.4.5. Coming back together as a whole class

Each group could be given the opportunity to report back on what they have discussed within the group. It is not always possible to give all groups this opportunity either because of time constraints, or because a particular point might have been mentioned by the preceding groups and it might therefore not be necessary to be repeated by other groups. After the reporting back session, the teacher can build on all the thinking and talking the learners have been doing in their small groups in a general discussion (Mckay, 1995:116). At this point, the learners will have understood the theme and have many ideas which could gear them for the discussion.

5.5. Conclusion

In this literature review, I argued why it is important to use the group learning method and also how it should be practised. I pointed out that learning in groups yields better academic achievement when compared to individualised learning. The latter promotes a competition spirit in a class which can be demotivating and discouraging. Adult learners fear competition and do

not like to be compared with one another. Group learning also encourages adult learners (especially shy learners) to participate in the learning task.

I further argued that group learning enhances the self-esteem of adult learners when compared to individualised efforts, especially if the learner feels that he/she has contributed to the findings of the group and is accepted and liked by the group. It was also pointed out that group learning encourages adult learners to think critically. Adult learners experience many challenges in life which affect their lives and they need to be critical about them.

I argued for the importance of group learning as it helps learners to become problem-solvers. Adult learners need a teaching strategy which will enable them to solve problems, as their lives are characterised by many problems. Also, the world in which they live needs people with problem-solving skills.

In addition, I pointed out the basic elements the teacher should consider when planning and running group work lessons. Teachers need to expose adult learners to skills such as interpersonal skills which will enable learners to work harmoniously within a group. The teacher's organisation of a group will determine the success or failure of the group learning method. This demands careful planning, as adult learners would otherwise not engage themselves in the learning activity.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research approach

This study is approached from an interpretative view, using qualitative data collection methods. According to Merriam (1998:2), an interpretative design aims to interpret and recount the meanings which research participants give to reality around them. Interpretative studies are formed by descriptions of explanations for, or meanings given to phenomenon by both the researcher and the research participants, rather than by definitions and interpretations of the researcher alone. The interpretative design portrays the individual as forming part of a social world. It is thus mainly concerned with interpreting and understanding the social world. It also

emphasises action and interaction within the social context and understanding of the intended actions of individuals.

6.2 Sampling

According to Merriam (1998:16), sampling refers to the process of selecting the individuals to be observed. It also includes details of where to and what to observe. A sample is any group of individuals from whom information is obtained. For the purpose of this research, purposeful sampling was used.

This type of sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight into and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned”. (Merriam, 1998:61). Of the purposeful sampling types, convenience purposeful sampling was best suited for this research. The sample consisted of one classroom, from the Tzaneen Adult learning centre in the Northern Province. Although this centre is situated in the heart of Tzaneen, it caters for learners from the deep rural parts of the Northern Province. The participants were predominantly farm workers who work in the plantations, and coffee fields as well as domestic workers from the area. The centre was chosen because of its stability in terms of lesson attendance and active functioning. It contains men and women of different age groups. The learners in this study were the learners as well as the teacher as both parties were involved in a teaching-learning situation where group learning could be observed.

6.3 The context of data collection

The centre where my inquiry was conducted is situated in the Northern Province in the area called Tzaneen. Adult classes are conducted in the Tzaneen Technical college where there are no special buildings for learning activities. The literacy classes are organised by the Department of Education, Arts and Culture with financial assistance from a Non- Governmental Organisation (hereafter referred to as NGO). Classes were held in the evening between 18h 00 and 19h 30 twice weekly.

There were thirty learners in the centre. Regular class attendance on the part of both the learners and the teacher was observed. The classroom in which the investigation was conducted is well equipped with air conditioning, an overhead projector and sufficient seating. The physical learning environment was conducive to any type of learning. Desks in the classroom were arranged in fixed rows.

6.4 Data collection methods

Qualitative data collection methods, as outlined by Merriam (1998:69) is divided into three categories, namely: interviewing, observation and document analysis. For the purpose of this study, participant observation, together with interviews emanating from the adult learners' class situation was used.

6.4.1 Participant observation

Collecting data from observing a phenomenon of interest is commonly referred to as participant observation (Merriam, 1998:91). The manner in which participant observation is used in an inquiry, depends on the phenomenon which is under investigation. As a result, the position of the researcher varies from full participant to full observer.

In this study, participant observation was chosen because it gave me a first hand account of the situation under investigation. The classroom activities were observed which provided information on how group learning was being implemented in the centre. Unstructured interviews were conducted for further clarification of certain events and behaviours of the learners in the classroom. When participant observation was combined with interviewing and document analysis such as attendance registers, it allowed for the holistic interpretation of the behaviour of adult learners in the classroom. A complete observer stance was adopted at the beginning of the observation period, the reason being that the learners were not as yet familiar with my activities and would be afraid to air their views in my presence.

According to Merriam (1998:94), it is not possible for the researcher to remember everything

taking place in the classroom. For this reason, field notes were taken. Firstly, the field notes included a description of the classroom. The arrangement of the desks in the classroom together with the design of the arrangement formed part of my field notes.

Secondly, the field notes included details about the participants. In this study, the participants included all the adult learners in the classroom and their teacher. Documents such as registers were observed to note the number of participants who availed themselves for each day, together with the number of learners who were absent from the lessons. The field notes further included the characteristics of learners present in the classroom.

The participants' activities together with how they interact with one another in the class were also noted. Different teaching strategies that the teacher employed in the classroom were noted in order to look at the extent to which group learning was used. Field notes included verbal behaviour such as silence, and looking outside while other learners were engaged in classroom activities.

The audio tape recorder was also used to help remembering activities in the classroom. Direct quotations were made of parts of the conversation because the tape recorder does not influence what had been said. Lastly, the unstructured interview notes and conversations were noted. My comments were also noted to clarify certain activities which ought to have happened and did not.

The preceding section of the study explored the participant observation position of the researcher. The next section will explore the ethical considerations of the research.

6.5 Ethical considerations

In qualitative research, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings. During data collection the participants need to be informed of the position of the researcher and give consent. According to Merriam (1998:215), observations which are conducted without the awareness of those being observed do raise ethical issues of privacy and informed consent.

In this study the method used for collecting data was observation. I was granted permission to conduct research from the coordinator of the literacy programme in the Tzaneen centre. Both the teacher and the learners were informed of my position as a researcher and gave consent of observing the activities in the classroom particularly group learning. I was able to gain access to documents such as registers and learners' exercise books which became helpful for my research.. I am aware that by informing the learners about the purpose of the research might influence the findings. In mentioning my position and the purpose of the research, I presumed that the learners would behave normally and interact freely without being influenced by my presence in the class.

As a researcher I knew when and how to intervene. Whenever an activity which ought to have taken place and did not do so I was able to intervene in the most amicable manner. I could also interview learners for further information and clarification. I finally strove for accuracy in data analysis in order to avoid biases. Although it is difficult to void the research of biases, dishonesty and predictions the ethical element of accuracy was strived at during data collection and analysis.

6.6 Qualitative data analysis procedures



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The previous section focussed on the ethical considerations of this enquiry. This section will focus on the procedure which was followed when data analysis took place. For the purpose of this study, the constant comparative method of data analysis was used. This method entails the organisation and coding of data, unitising, categorising and refining categories by writing rules of inclusion, and lastly, patterning.

6.6.1 Organisation of data and coding.

All the data from the field notes and the tape recorder were read to form a holistic picture of the collected data. Each page of the collected data was coded. At the top of the page, the date on which the observation was done, was noted, while the set of field notes and the page number of each set were also noted. e.g. /m/16/09/3. This means that the first set of field notes was taken on 16 September, 1998 page 3. It was important to code data so that it would be easy to go through all the sets of data. The data was then photocopied to allow for referring back to the

original copy to clarify certain information when needed.

6.6.2 Unitising

From the organised data, I moved to the unitising stage. According to Merriam (1998:179) and Maykut and Morehouse (1994:128), a unit of data is any meaningful segment of data. A unit can either be presented as a single word, a sentence or as several paragraphs. It should also satisfy the following criteria: it should be heuristic, implying that it should be able to reveal information that is relevant to the enquiry and be able to stimulate the researcher to go beyond the information presented. Lastly, it should be meaningful on its own and it should be interpreted without using any additional information added.

The interviews were conducted in an African language and the quotations of the interviews will be in the language of the respondents. I will provide English meanings for each unit in order to make the information accessible to the readers. The following are examples of units of data from interviews with learners regarding group learning:

* Some of the learners who showed no interest in group discussion and turned their chairs to face the board. When asked why she did that, she replied by saying :

“ Ke nyaka go bona seo se ngwadilego letlapeng ”

I want to see what is being written on the board.

“ Ga ke tsebe seo re se dirago ”.

I do not know what we are doing.

“ Ga re na tswelopele ”.

We do not have any progress.

* Some learners who sat quietly without contributing ideas to the group, replied as follows:

“ Ga re tsebe gore re thome kae ”

We do not know where to start.

* a learner from a group that could not reach consensus, replied:

“ Ga ke sa nyaka go dira le bona ka gore ga ba kwane ka taba e tee, le gona seo ba se bolelago ga se kgonege, ke lapile ”.

I am no longer interested in what they are doing because we do not agree. Moreover, what they are saying is impossible. I am tired.

* a teacher who gives work to the learners in a group but is unable to supervise them:

“ Mosadi yo mongwe yo a ba rutago ga a sa tla o na le bothata”.

The lady who teaches us does not come anymore. She has a problem.

* A group of learners who could not see group learning as beneficial:

“ Ga ba na kgahlego ka ge ba nyaka go tseba go bala le go ngwala”

They do not have any interest because they want to know how to read and write.

The following list shows examples of units identified from observational data:

Learners are not taught to be accountable to the group.

Learners are not exposed to the knowledge that they ought to be responsible for, for the sake of discussion.

Learners do not know where to start when they are grouped together to discuss a topic.

Instead of starting with the group discussion, learners waste time asking each other what is expected of them.

Learners are left without supervision or guidance from the teacher.

Some learners sit quietly without making any contributions to the discussion.

Some groups experience problems with learners who cannot focus their attention on the given task.

Learners view group learning as a waste of time because they are used to individualised teaching and the repetitive method.

Learners who are able to grasp concepts fast, do not want to be grouped with slow learners.

Learners become disinterested in discussion topics which are not helping them with reading and writing.

Male learners find it difficult to be grouped with female learners.

Male learners from the same work place prefer to be grouped together.

The following categories were formed from the above units:

6.6.3 Categories

After the unitising stage, I grouped the main ideas of the data which had the same meaning to serve as a provisional category. The identified units of data were compared with the provisional categories to see whether they fit in to any of the categories. Any units of data that were found fitting for any one of the categories were placed in the appropriate category. It was possible that some units might not fit into any of the identified categories. For that reason, new categories were developed. Identified categories were refined by writing rules of inclusion which were used to convey the meaning of the data contained in a category.

The following table shows the categories together with units that reveal the meaning of a category emanating from the units of observational data.

<p>Category 1: The teacher does not use group learning approach well.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Units.</p> <p>This category contains the following units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The learners are not taught to be accountable to the discussion group. ◦ The learners are not exposed to the knowledge that they ought to be responsible for the sake of the discussion. ◦ The learners do not know where to start when they are grouped together discuss a topic. Instead of starting with the group discussion, learners waste time asking each other what is expected of them. ◦ Learners are left without supervision or guidance from the teacher. ◦ Some groups experience problems with learners who sit quietly without contributing to the discussion.
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- Some groups experience problems with learners who cannot focus their attention on the given task.

Category 2 : sexism influenced the organization of group learning negatively

Units

- Male learners found it difficult to be grouped with female learners.
- Male learners who work at the same place prefer to be grouped together, while on the other hand, female learners coming from the same work place also prefer to be grouped together.

Category 3: The teacher uses the narrative method which is teacher-centred than group learning.

Units

- Narrative method is used.
- Repetitive method is mostly used.

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Category 4: Learners are not interested in topics that involve group discussion.

Units

- Learners prefer reading and writing.
- Learners who are able to read and write do not find it comfortable to be grouped with those who are struggling.

6.6.4 Patterning

Patterning can be seen as a way of establishing the relatedness between categories. After I had established the relevant categories within which data was organised and sorted for the sake of interpretation, the following pattern emerged from the data:

* Currently, group learning is not practised effectively in the Tzaneen Technical adult learning centre because of the following:

- (i) Learners are not prepared for group learning
- (ii) The teacher seems not to understand how and why group learning should be implemented.
- (iii) Group learning is introduced too late in the academic year.

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The above identified pattern will be discussed in an integrated manner. Since the interviews were conducted in an African language, the quotations of the interview will also be provided in the language of the respondent. I will provide English meanings for the units in order to make the information accessible to readers of other languages.

7 THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The previous section focussed on the presentation and analysis of observational data. In this section, the research findings will be mentioned and discussed in the light of the research problem. This will be followed by the implications of the research findings.

It can be deduced from the observation data that group learning is not functioning well in the Tzaneen area adult centre of the Northern Province. From the data which was collected and presented, it is clear that the teacher did not apply the group learning approach well. In the three lessons that were observed, the desks were arranged in pairs in order to discuss the theme on mixed marriages. The teacher gave the learners a learning task without explaining it to them and left them unattended and unsupervised. From the literature review, this is contrary to how group learning operates. According to Hilke (1990:14), Vella, (1994:13) and Gravett (1997:43), the teacher should explain the learning task explicitly before learners are divided into groups. This does not mean that the teacher should provide the answers to the stated problem. The teacher should be in class to supervise the discussion. A clear explanation of the learning tasks will gear the learners for discussion. According to Gravett (1997:43), clear instructions to the learners about the learning task should be given also considering the time allocated for completing the task. From my perception, the teacher uses the group learning method only when it is

convenient for him and not with the aim of achieving a specific learning goal. This kind of practice clearly indicates that either the teacher is not knowledgeable about planning the group learning approach or that he does not prepare himself adequately for implementing group discussions. For group learning to function properly the teacher should spend a good deal of time preparing for group discussion. According to Michael and Gordon (1971:85), the preparation time for group learning should be lengthy, but according to my experience, and from what I have observed at the centre many teachers think that group learning does not require much preparation time. In fact, some teachers regard it as a method that will provide them with sufficient time to rest.

Although learners were arranged in groups for discussion, in some groups learners did not know where to start and what was expected of them. When given a theme for discussion, some learners were copying what was written on the board, completely disregarding the discussion within their group. Some learners within the groups even turned their chairs away from group circle to face the writing board. Others were talking and joking to one another. In some groups I noticed complete silence with many learners not contributing to the group discussion. All these problems can be attributed to the teacher not using the group learning approach more effectively. The teacher should teach the learners some social skills such as being accountable, having respect for each other's contributions in the group and also being responsible for accomplishing a learning goal. All these social skills are important for group functioning, because the knowledge that will be produced from the discussions, will belong to all members of the group. Hilke (1990:10) confirms my statement by indicating that the success of a group depends on the individual efforts. This implies that each group member should be given a portion of the work and take responsibility for supplying the information which will be helpful to the group. This is essential for group functioning. It is also important for the teacher to teach the learners to be accountable and responsible for the discussion.

The teacher's lack of knowledge in organising the group learning approach resulted in to group learning not functioning well. Consequently, eighty percent of the learners in the class started to keep quiet and listened to talkative learners. Contributions came from the same learners every

time. In such a situation, shy learners will hide and not learn anything. They will become demotivated and discouraged if they feel they are not making a progress. Adult learners would only like to come to class if they made some progress Gravett (1997:12). Therefore, it is important that each member of the group should make a contribution to benefit him/her and the whole group. Certain learners should not teach all the others.

Group members also had a problem to decide who should report their findings to the whole class. It is the duty of the teacher to explain to the learners what the procedure will be before they divide into groups. According to Greyling (1998 :30), each group member should be allocated duties to perform. If the groups consisted of the same group members, the reporting should rotate so that every member could get a turn to report. It is not advisable to keep to the same selection of group members for a long period. Changes need to be effected about once a month in order to give learners sufficient time to show their abilities. The teacher should guard against making changes too frequently as this might disturb the learning (Greyling, 1998:3).

The organisational problem experienced by the teacher often resulted in some learners not reporting their findings to the larger group as there was no sufficient time to do so. This points to the teacher being unable to structure group learning, not having indicated the time frame for the discussion.

The introduction of group work late in the academic year left the learners with a view that learning in groups is a waste of time, especially when repetitive and individualised teaching was used the beginning of the year. From my observation, the teacher used the repetitive method by repeating a sound or a word for a long time. From my observation, when the teacher teaches sounds of words and vowels, learners were made to repeat one sound for a long time most of the time. Some learners could say the sounds without looking at them. When words with such sounds were written on the board learners were expected to identify them. Almost the whole class could not recognise the sounds. This could be attributed to the learning content being meaningless. In my view , the method proved to be a failure. It only promoted dependancy on the teacher. According to McKay (1990:59) dependency of the learners might make learners feel

stupid and inadequate, causing them not to want to speak in the presence of their classmate. The teacher could make learning meaningful by employing group learning method. This method dominated all other methods used in the class and was the most preferred method. It leaves the learners being passive for a long time, listening to the teacher presenting his/her knowledge. This approach contradicts the ABET policy (1997 : 27) which indicates that teachers should move away from teacher-centred methods to learner- centered methods.

The learner-centred approach is an important method to be used when working with adult learners. It means that learners are actively involved in the learning process through an on-going dialogue between them and the teacher. Both parties determine the content of the curriculum and the learning objectives of the lesson. The approach also focuses on the real life-needs of the learners, the responsibility of learners to determine their goals and lastly, the steps which should be followed to achieve the goals (Huerta, 1993: no page). In line with the learner-centered approach, is the participatory approach which was mentioned by Freire, in (Huerta, 1993: no page) an educator. According to Huerta (1993:no page) the participatory approach is often used interchangeably with the learner- centred approach. The two terms are indeed similar because the content of the learning objective is determined through ongoing dialogue between the teacher and the learners. The participatory approach goes beyond the learner-centered method because it does not advocate literacy as a vehicle for personal transformation and social change (Huerta, 1993: no page).

Up to now, I have argued about the importance of the learner-centered method as opposed to the teacher- centered. From my observation , when the teacher teaches sounds of words and vowels learners were made to repeat one sound for a long time most of the time. Some learners could say the sounds without looking at them. When words with such sounds were written on the chalk board learners were expected to identify them. Almost the whole class could not recognise the sounds. This could be attributed to the learning content being meaningless. In my view, the method proved to be a failure. It only promoted dependency on the teacher. According to Mckay (1990 :59) dependency of the learners might make the teacher feel important, but will ultimately make learners feel stupid and inadequate, causing them not to want to speak in the

presence of their classmates. The teacher could make the learning meaningful by employing group learning method.

Late introduction of the group learning method also created a spirit of selfishness and competition which are contrary to the principles of group learning. My observation is that those learners who are quick to grasp the writing and reading skills found it uncomfortable to be grouped with slow learners. This type of behaviour is also confirmed by Greyling (1998:28) when she explains that learners who are creative in their thinking may find it difficult to be grouped with slow learners. The group may, however, find their unusual ideas unacceptable. In my view, this type of situation could be solved by the teacher explaining the importance of respecting everyone's contributions, irrespective of whether she/he is a slow learner or not. This might improve the effectiveness of the group learning strategy. It also demands that the teacher should move among the groups, check for misunderstandings that might arise and be prepared to deal with them. Group discussions could eventually benefit both slow learners and high potential learners because those who are gifted have good observational skills, a long attention span and a good memory. The necessary precautionary measures should, however be taken not to exploit the highly gifted (Greyling, 1998:29). Slow learners should also be encouraged to participate in a group of high potential learners. If the teacher could take note of this successfully, the competition spirit will subside. The competition spirit is contrary to the team spirit which should prevail in ABET classes. According to Galbrain, in Gravett (1997:10), adult learners need a strategy that is characterised by collaboration. Instead of helping them, slow learners will feel isolated and ultimately stop attending classes.

Sexism made it difficult to implement group learning in the Tzaneen centre of the Northern Province. On many occasions, male learners who are in the minority, were left out of the group if the other male members of the group had not yet arrived. When I asked the teacher why male were excluded from the group, the teacher responded by saying that male learners do not trust ideas emanating from female learners.

From the literature, it can be deduced that male learners have a problem of being led by female

leaders. According to Knox (1978 no page no.) sex differences reflect context as well as condition. Many men will only participate in the learning activity in the presence of women, if they are chosen as leaders. Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, and Scoones, (1995:31) contradict the above statement by indicating that when an adult educator organises groups, the group should consist of one male and one female. The two should alternate to work as facilitators. I do concur with the above statement because if both sexes could work together, they will enrich one another by exchanging ideas and learn to work together even in the work situation. This is an indication that if men do not outgrow the practice more dropouts will be experienced from the adult centre. I have realised that most of the male learners in the class work at the same plantation and therefore preferred to be grouped together. The advantage of these people coming from the same plantation is the fact that the group will be maintained and they will have more time to discuss issues. Above all, they know each other better. This enables learners free to contribute their ideas without any fear. According to Vella, in Gravett, (1997 :32), adult learners should experience a feeling of security in the educational situation.

The previous section was an exposition of the findings of the research with regard to what was happening and what was supposed to happen in the Tzaneen adult learning centre of the Northern Province. The following section will explore the implications of the research findings.

8 IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study found that the teacher had little knowledge of how group learning should be implemented. For that reason, training is required to equip the teacher with the proper implementation skills of group learning. If the teacher is not well trained, and does not practise group learning well, learners will demotivated to continue with their lessons to register for the next level the following academic year. This will not decrease the number of illiterates in this Province which is already hard hit by the illiteracy rate and will add to South African literacy.

9 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research reported on the extent to which group learning is used in an ABET centre of the Northern Province. The problem was investigated by via participant observation as the main data collection method.

What emerged from the research is that although group learning is practised, correct planning and implementation of group learning needs attention. If the objective of the teacher is to involve the adult learners in the group learning activities, group interaction skills should be exposed to learners. The basic elements that need to be satisfied for successful group learning and various methods of group learning should be exposed to the learners. Lastly, the supervision of groups should be done by the teacher to ensure that learning is taking place. Each of these or lack thereof, will affect the outcomes of the group learning process.

For the proper functioning of group learning, the teacher needs to be trained and be exposed to the group learning approach. Group learning should be introduced the beginning of the academic year so that practitioners can move away from the repetitive and narrative methods that are teacher-centered.

Information obtained from teachers and learners were analysed. The coded data revealed four main categories with two patterns. An analysis and interpretation of the patterns provided much information about group learning. Learners revealed the necessity to be taught skills that are necessary for group functioning.

The findings that have been discussed were arrived at after a systematic inquiry. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to arrive at the findings. I attempted to work towards validity and reliability by implementing the following strategies: field notes from the centre were taken which helped me to remember the activities that took place in the class. I have also set up an "audit trail" in the study which indicated to the reader how data was collected, how I arrived at the categories and lastly how decisions were made throughout the research. This

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Observer's comments (OC)

The classroom arrangement is not suitable for group learning activities.

The teacher wrote "bj" on the board. He pointed at the board and asked learners to tell him what was written on the board. Learners did not answer the question until the teacher started to point at them. Three learners who were pointed out first did not give the correct answer. The fourth one got the correct answer.

Two learners who were seated on my right hand side were pointing at the words on the board.

OC. I could realise that the two learners wanted to help each other.

The teacher instructed the learners to take out their homework books.

Another two learners exchanged their books to check how each of them had written the assigned homework.

OC. Once again I could realise that they loved to do things together, although there were those learners who kept everything to themselves. I could not interview this "pair".

The teacher pointed at the learners randomly to find out what they had written. Most of the answers were not correct.

OC. From the learner's response, I could realise that learners did their work individually without being helped by their peers.

On my extreme left, two learners were talking to each other pointing in each other's work. The teacher told them to keep quiet. But this was done in the most polite manner.

As the teacher moved around, checking on their work, from the teacher's remarks most learners did not write the correct answer. In the process some learners started to speak to each other while others shared the answers in their books.

One learner on my right hand side appeared to be very nervous. The teacher approached him and asked him why he looked so nervous and the learner responded by saying “I cannot understand a thing out of the whole work”.

One learner, who occupied a diagonal opposite seat from mine smiled at me. I went straight to this learner and found that she had also written wrong answers. She asked for my assistance. Two other learners called for my attention.

OC. From such occurrences, I could realise that learners do not have a problem of sharing information.

The teacher started with a new topic for those who completed the work and those who did not complete or got the answers wrong effected corrections.

OC. The teacher continued to work with those that were competent and left behind him those who really needed his help. He could have completed the current task with the whole class before he started with a new thing altogether.

The teacher divided learners into pairs and requested to formulate words with the following combination: “fs”. Each learner was expected to come up with two words which could be used in sentences of their own choice. Learners started to talk to each other.

OC. I could realise that they were asking each other what to do. They were unable to use the combination “fs” in a sentence. I interviewed one learner who was struggling. She indicated that fast learners always leave them behind.

I moved around the groups and interviewed one group that was not doing the work and they responded as follows: “*Rena re difofu ka moka*” (We are all blind), “*Ga re kwesisi go re re thome kae*” (we do not understand where to start)

OC. I explained the instructions to the ‘pair’. I gave them an example of what they were expected to do. From my intervention, I could realise that instructions were not clearly explained

to them and that was why they could not even start with the work.

I interviewed other pairs that seemed to be serious with their work and asked them if they wanted to be grouped together and they replied as follows:

Learners: Yes

Researcher : Why?

Learners: Because we are able to help each other. one another.

Another pair:

Researcher :Do you like to learn with your partner?

Learner: Yes

Researcher: Why?

Learner: Because we can struggle together but we have a problem, both of us do not know what to do.

Researcher: (to the other partner) Do you like to be grouped and learn together?

Learner: Yes

Researcher : Why?

Learner : *Ge re le ba babedi re a thusana. Nna ke rata go tseba go ngwala le go bala ka gore ke nyaka go bala Beibele kerekeng ka la boraro.* (Because if we are two we are able to help one another. I want to know how to read and write because I want to read the bible on Wednesday at church.

I went to the teacher after the lessons and ask him why wouldn't he group the male learners who did not have partners with the other lady who did not have a partner too.

Teacher: Men around this area have a problem of mixing easily with women in public.