

DEVELOPMENT IN PAST FEW YEARS: SELF LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a research project exploring the development of independent learning in young children. In the first year the project has explored the work of 16 practitioners working with 3-5 year old children, using a range of methodologies including questionnaires, interviews and reflective dialogues (based on video recordings of particular classroom episodes), reflective journals and child assessment checklists. It is argued that, while the development of independent learning is generally accepted as an important educational aim, current trends in Primary education which have encouraged a more teacher-directed approach, are not helpful. The paper advances a model of independent learning which is based on developmental psychological research, and presents interim findings from the project which suggest that even our youngest children are capable of considerable independence in their learning. While particular pedagogical techniques and approaches need to be developed, many of these are well-established and researched, and can be shown to be effective in fostering independent learning abilities within the Primary school context.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of a good teacher should, of course, be to make themselves redundant. If we are to properly educate others, we must enable them to become independent learners. There is currently widespread interest in fostering 'independent learning' among young children, as attested by a number of recent publications (Featherstone & Bayley, 2001; Williams, 2003) and, particularly within the Early Years phase of education, by the current enthusiasm for such approaches as Reggio Emilia and HighScope, both of which emphasise children's autonomy and ownership of their learning, together with the value of making the processes of learning explicit to the child. This paper seeks to respond to this interest in two ways. Firstly, by examining the psychological and educational research literature for work which might inform our understanding about the nature of independent learning.

It is clear from these and other governmental policy statements that there is currently a strong commitment to the area of independent learning. However, there is also a need for clear definition. It is also apparent that, while there is a clear interest in and commitment to fostering

independent learning from governmental agencies, education policy makers and teachers, transforming these intentions and aspirations into everyday classroom practice within schools has proved problematic.

There appear to be problems at the level of policy and at the level of classroom practice. To begin with, while the Government and the various educational policy-making institutions have repeatedly asserted their commitment to fostering independent learning, it has been argued that, in some respects, current educational policies, including recent initiatives, are confused in their impact on the development of children's independent learning. The focus of the National Curriculum, for example, has been claimed to be on content and the body of knowledge children need rather than on more generic learning and thinking skills. To some extent this has been recognised in the most recent incarnation of the National Curriculum (DfEE/QCA, 1999) with the introduction of Key Skills, including 'Improving own learning performance' and 'Thinking Skills'. The introduction of very focused literacy and numeracy strategies within Primary schools have also been claimed, at least in their initial impact, to have constrained opportunities for the development of individual learning styles and independent lines of enquiry. The pressures of target-setting and the publication of league tables of SATs performance, where rather narrowly defined aspects of children's learning are given an overweening significance, also do not seem conducive to the spirit of promoting independence. In relation to fostering children's abilities to learn and think for themselves, there is clearly a need for what has been termed 'joined-up thinking' in the area of educational policy.

METHODOLOGY APPROACHES

In the first year the project explored the work of 16 teachers/educators working with children in the 3-5 age range. The qualities of their current practice which encourage independent learning were observed, recorded and analysed. They were also involved in developing a range of innovative practices, mostly derived from the previous literature, which were similarly recorded. The project used a range of methodologies including questionnaires, observations, interviews and reflective dialogues (based on video recordings of particular classroom episodes), reflective journals and child assessment checklists.

These consisted of 35 statements drawn from the literature relating to previous studies of the development of children's self-regulation and metacognition (eg Bronson, 2000; Brooker, 1996; Featherstone & Bayley, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Winne & Perry, 2000). They were given to each practitioner, who was asked to select six children in their class (2 high independence, 2 intermediate and 2 low) and to assess their independent learning using the checklist. For each statement, the teacher had to assess whether this was true of the child always, usually, sometimes or never. At the start of the second and third terms in the school year these were revisited and new assessments made, in order to measure the development of the children's

independent learning behaviour. From the 16 practitioners involved in Year 1 of the project, this resulted in data for 96 children recorded on three occasions i.e. a total of 288 assessments for each of the statements. As will be reported later in the paper, analysis of this data, and the classroom observations, enabled the production of a 22 item checklist which highlights the key elements of independent learning in this age group. This new checklist, the Checklist of Independent Learning Development 3-5 (CHILD 3-5), will be used and continued to be developed in year two of the project. It contains statements under each of the four areas of self-regulation identified by Bronson (2000): emotional, prosocial, cognitive & motivational.

Working Groups and Independent Learning Innovations

The Project team was divided into four working groups consisting of five members: - two nursery practitioners, two reception practitioners and a member of the Faculty of Education. The groups were chosen to reflect a mix of settings. These groups were the focus for discussion about ideas concerning independent learning, current practice that encourages self-regulation and factors that constrain this aspect of children's development. The groups also chose an activity or innovation that they could develop in their own settings to encourage some aspect of independent learning. Innovations were suggested by the research team again based on the previous research of pedagogical practices fostering self-regulation in young children reviewed above. The pedagogical innovations explored by working groups during the first year included:

- developing mathematical language through role play and use of puppets
- developing the home corner
- developing a child-directed table or area
- developing writing through role play areas (eg: Post Office, School Office)
- promoting Reciprocal Learning
- Reciprocal Learning in relation to Mathematical Language
- Peer Tutoring
- Collaborative Group Work

Finally, the following two quotations from practitioners involved in the project make very clear the value they have come to place on working with their children in ways which encourage independent learning:

‘Learning is intrinsic to life and because it is this important children need to be the owners of their own learning; they won’t see it as intrinsic to life if they don’t own it themselves – everything they do must have a purpose which makes sense to them’

And to the question, ‘when the project has finished, do you think you will carry on or stop working in this way?’:

‘Oh yes, I could not now. They (the children) would absolutely kill me if I didn’t! No I would, definitely, because it’s been so valuable, and it’s been really good for everybody. It’s been good for me to see different sides of the children, and to relinquish some space and control to them. And it’s just had really good feedback from them and from parents, and you know throughout, they’re all fired up about it.’

FUTURE SCOPE

From the results of the first year of the project, it is clear that there is considerable scope to develop the independent learning abilities of children in the 3-5 age range. In the future we hope to be able to expand the project to working with older children throughout the Primary Years. With the introduction of a detailed and content-heavy National Curriculum, and National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy, time for children to follow their own ideas, to make their own choices, and develop as self-regulating learners, has been sharply diminished. Increasingly, practitioners and policy-makers are beginning to see the importance of restoring this balance. We hope to make an important contribution by helping practitioners to develop well-founded, well-researched and workable ways of developing children’s abilities in these areas.

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