

Promoting Independent Working in a Year 5 Class through Action Research: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This article describes an action research self-study carried out with my class of ten-year-olds to enable them to work independently without constant prompting. The aims of the study were to improve the children's ability to self-regulate within a learning environment that promoted respectful relationships, rational authority and ethical care. A learning community was developed and it was found that by working with the children to share the responsibility, they were able to develop improved self-regulatory skills. The evidence suggests children were happy and respectful and chose to work hard to make their best effort.

Introduction

The action research reported on here is an examination of one specific aspect of primary school children's capacity to learn independently – namely their ability to maintain attention while working away from the teacher. (In the USA, the term 'self-regulated learning' is generally used as the equivalent of the English 'independent learning'.)

There is considerable evidence that the ability to self-regulate has many benefits for children (Zimmerman, 2002; Boekaerts, 2002; Schunk, 2005; Duckworth et al., 2009), however, in reality, it is not easy to achieve and little is known about its implementation from the viewpoint of either a

practitioner or the children (Meyer et al., 2008). Studies highlight the relationship between self-regulation and academic achievement, indicating how children and young people with good adaptive personal skills and learning resources, like self-regulation, are likely to succeed academically (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005); yet there is a gap in knowledge about practitioners' and pupils' views of independent learning which this study seeks to address.

I carried out action research to solve the problem of how to enable my class of Year 5 pupils to self-regulate, without needing constant prompting, through choice, within a classroom culture that only allows respectful dialogue (Glasser, 1998). In the process I experienced myself as a living contradiction (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005) as my attempts to develop independence resulted in disharmony, which is in opposition to my values of ethical care (Noddings, 1984) and rational authority (Matthews, 1994). I am committed to resolving this dilemma so that I can explain my educational influence in my own learning, the learning of others, and the social formations in which I live and work (Whitehead, 2010). This paper describes one aspect of my research, my views and the views of my class of Year 5 children, about our efforts to resolve the problem of children working independently without constant prompting by the teacher.

Context

In common with the other countries of the UK and our European neighbours, post-devolution Wales is committed to the promotion of independence in primary school age pupils' learning. Guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has referred repeatedly to developing independent learners in key documents on education, including the Personal and Social Education orders for Key Stage 2 (ages seven to eleven) (DCELLS, 2008a) and the Foundation Phase (ages four to seven) (DCELLS, 2008b).

Zimmerman (2002) argues that if children are to become successful learners they must develop the capacity to become independent, to self-regulate. There is considerable evidence (Meyer et al., 2008; TLRP, 2007; Watkins, 2005) that independent learning and the positive learning dispositions associated with it are beneficial for children. In Wales, the Foundation Phase puts independence at the heart of its philosophy and children are actively encouraged to take responsibility. Key Stage 2 policy

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and practice also places developing independence as a priority. Despite the rhetoric, independent learning can be a perplexing goal for many teachers, and there are some obstacles, including external accountability pressures, which restrict opportunities, along with a lack of support for teachers to develop the skills needed to facilitate this. My research set out to develop my own skills in classroom management to promote independent learning as well as those of the children.

The research was conducted with a convenience sample of twenty-nine Year 5 children of between nine and ten years of age. It took place in a primary school in an area in south Wales mostly made up of private housing. At the time of the research, the school encouraged independence as part of standard practice, but no more so than any other school in the area. I wished to explore in more depth how I could influence the children to take more responsibility when working away from me and was fortunate enough to be given considerable flexibility to manage the curriculum in my class to this end – a unique position that many teachers are not privilege to.

The Problem to be Solved

I recognized a problem with my class, as I have done with previous classes – they became distracted after an initial bout of attention, and I found myself locked in to regularly prompting them to complete work. This unsatisfactory situation created several dilemmas, one of which resulted in me being unable to fulfil my need to live out my ‘living educational theory’ (Whitehead, 2010). My epistemological and ontological values about children and relationships required that I honour children’s right to be treated respectfully. I wished to adopt a teaching philosophy based on ethical care (Noddings, 1984) and rational authority (Matthews, 1994), yet I experienced difficulties doing so whenever I required children to work independently.

Ethical caring occurs when a person acts caringly out of a belief that caring is the appropriate way of relating to people. Noddings’s approach (1984) to the ethics of care has been described as relational ethics because it prioritizes concern for relationships. In the context of school where the teacher is in a position of authority, I believe that rational authority (Matthews, 1994), that is authority based on earned respect (Goodman, 2009), best fits with an ethics of care and can promote pupils’ capacity to thrive. In other words, decisions made on behalf of the child can be

justified rationally to them if needed. That means the decisions must be based on good reasons, so the children can understand how actions will benefit them.

If a teacher has to prompt children constantly, it results in disharmony, mistrust and sometimes disrespect, from both the children and the teacher. My action research study was undertaken over one year, to try to resolve this dilemma. A small-scale intervention on the real world was carried with a close examination of the effects of my interventions (Cohen et al., 2007).

The aim was to identify the key interrelated concepts that could form a theoretical framework to explain how children might be able to work independently within a classroom that prioritizes respectful relationships of the kind where child and teacher earn each other's respect, where children follow my leadership out of informed consent – because they respect me – rather than out of deference or fear of consequences (Goodman, 2009).

During the year, the children were helped to become more independent using a variety of strategies. Sessions took place throughout the week when the children were expected to work without teacher involvement, help or interference once they had been prepared for independent activity. Children were allowed to take almost full responsibility for their attention to the task during that session, while being free to collaborate, help each other and talk about the work. Data on the experiences and perceptions of pupils, teacher, colleagues, parents and a number of outside observers were collected, analyzed and reflected on.

Historically, attitudes to educating children have changed considerably since 1944, when there was little if any attention paid to learning skills such as self-regulating; the emphasis was on preserving the social order and preparing children for work, the needs of the child were not viewed as of paramount importance (Alexander, 1995, cited in Williams, 2003). Over the last thirty years respecting children's rights and developing independence have emerged as themes in the education literature and are today regarded as of considerable importance.

I offer evidence to suggest that encouraging independence contributes to improving learning behaviours and attitudes, especially self-regulation, which raises motivation to learn and increases happiness at school – a key factor in achievement. The fact that the new guidance for the inspection of primary schools from September 2010 also expects children to work independently makes my research relevant to school improvement. Estyn inspectors are guided to consider how independent pupils are as learners:

'Look at pupils' attitudes to learning, in particular their interest in their work, their ability to sustain concentration and how well they engage in tasks' (Estyn, 2010: 19).

The strategies I adopted to promote independence were heavily influenced by the work of Claxton (2008), a theorist in the field of independent learning. He concludes that schools must provide children with opportunities to experience independence from an early age and increase that provision as they progress through school. The benefits to children of becoming independent are well documented in terms of preparation for adult life, including developing learning attributes such as self-regulation, which Zimmerman (2002) regards as a crucial lifelong learning skill. Other possible benefits include increased engagement, the development of metacognitive skills, increased satisfaction with and enjoyment of learning. For practitioners, the benefits may also include school improvement, and a positive impact on pupil performance (Bullock and Muschamp, 2006; Black et al., 2006). It is also claimed that it helps to develop effective classrooms (Meyer et al., 2008) and learning communities (Watkins, 2005). There are therefore many benefits ascribed to independent learning, but there are also difficulties, and these will both now be considered, from a practitioner's viewpoint.

In over twenty years of teaching in primary schools I have found that independence, and the ability to sustain attention without the need for teacher prompting, has been a goal of most teachers. Research with teachers shows that when children are able to work independently they develop a sense of well-being, and show many positive features, including constructive time management and self-discipline, qualities that ensure trust and respect from adults, and are active and energetic rather than passive learners (Williams, 2003).

This is particularly important in the light of the Welsh Assembly Government's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (WAG, 2004) and in particular Article 12 that makes clear that: 'Every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously' (UNICEF, 1989).

It has been my experience, however, that giving serious consideration to pupils' views on important things that really affect them can be neglected, and there are very few studies that examine the actual views of pupils on independent learning. This paper is the result of continuous consultation with pupils and will contribute to our current understanding of independent learning which lacks research on pupil voice.

Research Design

I regard knowledge as personal and subjective (Cohen et al., 2007); I therefore adopted a naturalistic, interpretive research design, favouring the importance of the subjective experience of the children in my class in the creation of the learning environment. To this end the research design was aimed at gaining perceptions, primarily of the pupils, and of myself, but also of those others who observed what was taking place in my classroom.

The study was small scale, specific and deep. It was action research with participatory and emancipatory elements. I chose action research, as the principles underpinning this kind of research, such as the need for democratic practices, care and respect for the individual and the need for disciplined enquiry, would allow me to improve my practice and live out my values (McNiff, 2002). The aim of the research was to empower (rather than overpower) children to self-regulate, and this is its emancipatory element – the difference it can make to the children. I view the dialogue with the children as essential to the research process making my research participatory.

The effects were measured rigorously and systematically, informed by continuous reflection on the changes that had taken place and informed the next step – a cyclical process. Sometimes several self-reflective spirals (Cohen et al., 2007) occurred alongside each other. I tried to be critical of myself as well as others who influenced the situation (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007).

Methods

Qualitative methods are used, with a multi-method interpretive approach in order to explore areas of self-regulation about which little is known. Based within an interpretive paradigm, I acknowledge that young children are likely to have a range of perspectives on the subject, which they may change within a short space of time. Black et al. (2006) refer to this as an inevitable effect of immature responses. In order to minimize this effect, frequent ‘snapshots’ of their opinions were taken, in various ways, and sometimes repeated, to collect as detailed a picture as possible. These ‘snapshots’ were data collection activities that ranged from ‘put your hands up if you enjoyed that’ to written questionnaires.

A range of procedures pertinent to the research at hand were used (Opie, 2004). All were designed to find out how successful I was in meeting the aims of my research. My first aim was to enable the children to sustain concentration when working independently without constant prompting. My second aim was to improve my practice, so that I was able to develop what Whitehead describes as my ‘living educational theory’ (2010). The methods used with the class were as follows.

Questionnaires

‘Snapshot’ questionnaires were created by me and given frequently, often in response to a new strategy. Their purpose was for the children to reflect on an aspect of the cycle that was currently occurring so that I could immediately measure its impact. This allowed me to quantify the children’s observations, interpretations and attitudes (Elliott, 1991) and make changes if needed. An example follows:

<i>Year 5, I'd like to know how your learning is going, please be honest. Circle the answer.</i>			
Doing the Egyptian project helps me make the most effort I can.	a lot	a little	not at all
I prefer the Egyptian project way of learning to anything else we have previously done.	a lot	a little	not at all
I am enjoying the Egyptian project.	a lot	a little	not at all
On the topic of Egypt I feel I have learnt	a lot	a little	not at all
...			

Interviews

These were carried out using Opie’s recommended open-ended, semi-structured approach (2004) – in order to gain the children’s perceptions of how the research was progressing. Open-ended questions were used, such as, ‘Tell me the story of your learning in Year 5’, and ‘How could I help you all to be more independent, what could I do?’, in order to explore teaching and learning through the eyes of those most closely involved, as recommended by Flutter and Rudduck (2004), who emphasize how important it is to take learners’ perspectives into account.

The children's responses were reflected upon and informed the cycles of research.

Observations

Daily observations were structured and took place every time the children worked independently. The number of times each pupil was off task was recorded on a data collection sheet. It had been agreed that I would not prompt them, but allow them to take responsibility for self-regulating, therefore these observations were a very important part of the learning environment and the research, in order to measure change. This role was shared between myself and each child in turn – they called themselves 'pupil researchers'. The children were taught about ethical issues, such as confidentiality and awareness of bias through the practical application of this task.

I kept weekly observational field notes on how long the target group for the observation stayed engaged and how they got themselves back to the task. These were reflected upon and written up in my journal.

A reflective journal

I kept a journal in order to write up events, comments, concerns and reflections on what was taking place, and to record an ongoing analysis of the data, using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). As Denscombe (2003) reminds us, it is so easy to forget things.

Children's work

The children's work was monitored closely when they worked independently – to look for any changes that were outside the normal parameters one would expect when they worked with teacher prompting – for example, was it as good, as neat, as accurate, as detailed as it would be with prompting? Field notes recorded observations that pertained to this, which were written up later in my reflective journal.

The views of visitors, colleagues and parents

Twenty adults came to see the children working independently over the year, on different occasions. They were invited to give feedback, verbal or

written, on what they observed, and were specifically invited to be critical, as this is a research project and authenticity was essential.

Ethical Issues

Careful consideration was given to ethical issues. Permission to carry out the research was sought from the headteacher and the identity of the children and school has been protected in all written accounts of the research.

Following Sikes's guidance (2004) I ensured that any work carried out promoted good, and was not harmful in any way. At the start of the year all the children were told what the research was about and how the data would be gathered, and were assured they would be asked their permission each time they were interviewed or filmed, and how it would be used. Throughout the year their views were sought and acted upon, the progress was frequently discussed and I strived to be transparent, so that they could see that they directly influenced the cycles. If they did not like strategies or thought they were unhelpful, I ceased using them.

Parents were written to and the research explained; all parents were asked for permission to film their children and all agreed.

Intervention Strategies

Following initial observations and collection of baseline data at the beginning of the year, I shared the research aims with the children and immediately began to change the situation. Emphasis was placed throughout on the nurturing of respect, responsibility and the development of a learning community.

Meyer et al.'s description (2008) of independent learning identifies three key elements that are needed for it to take place – two external and one internal. The first external element is the development of a strong relationship between teachers and pupils, involving trust and a mutual responsibility for learning. The second external element is the establishment of an 'enabling environment'. The internal elements are the cognitive, metacognitive and affective skills children need to be successful. Cognitive skills include memory, attention and problem-solving. Metacognitive skills are skills associated with an understanding of how learning occurs, while affective skills are skills that are related to feelings and emotions

(Meyer et al., 2008). These key elements shaped my interventions during the research cycles, introducing a broad range of strategies. Some examples follow.

Relationships

Developing a class community and always talking to the children respectfully, using words that develop a group identity: 'our learning', and 'we need to think about' (Noddings, 2003; Matthews, 1994; Allard and Cooper 2001; Watkins, 2005; Glasser, 1998; Rogers, 1995; Sharp, 2007).

Skills

Developing metacognitive skills such as how to become reflective learners who understand the impact of effective learning behaviours like collaboration and knowing what to do when they are stuck and how to improve these (Claxton, 2002; Clarke, 1998; Black et al., 2006; Dweck, 2000).

Developing an enabling environment

Prioritizing the need to allow children to share responsibility and standing back so that they may learn how to do so, including making mistakes (Cullingford, 2006; Williams, 2003; Goleman, 1996).

All of these elements and more were introduced through the research cycles and data were collected and analyzed in order to understand what was taking place.

Findings

I interrogated the data to see how the pupils' efforts to self-regulate when working independently was developed and maintained. A grounded theory-style approach was used to allow theory to emerge from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I sought to interpret how the children made sense of the experiences that required them to make a sustained effort to be independent without any prompting from me. Reflexivity and triangulation was used to analyze all the accounts of the children, myself, other adults and the setting itself.

The key concept of effort, defined as 'persistent and uninterrupted attention to the task', emerges as very significant to the study. My journal

is micro-analyzed to search for words associated with this category, such as 'self-regulate', 'concentrate' and 'independent'. These data sets are then further explored, looking at properties and dimensions, to discover meanings and relationships, trends and themes.

I believe that the improvement in effort and increase in respectfulness is considerable and this continues throughout the year. This view is arrived at by analyzing the data.

I begin with examples from my journal:

Videod them again today to show changes in effort – fantastic . . . what a difference. They settled so quickly, it was really quiet, no-one bothered about the camera. Everyone was on task nearly all the time. The work was excellent. (23 Nov.)

The children become much more able to self-regulate but some remain in need of minimal non-verbal monitoring – eye contact – and this role is shared between pupils and teacher – named pupil researcher (PR).

pupil researcher tick lists show almost all the class work without distraction when independent. (4 Dec.)

The view that effort improves is also corroborated by colleagues, including one who has taught this class in the past. An extract from their written feedback indicates this improvement:

The children collected resources independently and did not come back and ask Mrs Brindley one single thing for the next 25 minutes, which I found remarkable.

Twenty adults came to see the children working independently, and all of them commented positively on how much effort the children made, and also how respectful the atmosphere was. Some examples follow:

This is what I want to do but I don't know where to begin . . . I was immediately encouraged and heartened that what I had imagined in my mind as being an 'ideal' model of teaching and learning is practicable and realistic! (Teacher on MA course)

All of the feedback received from the parents about my approach and the aims of the research are equally positive: respect and effort emerging as distinct themes in the data once more, for example, in answer to, 'What went well?'

The way the children played the biggest part in all their projects. I think it keeps the children far more interested.

The 'snapshot' questionnaires also indicate that the children perceive their effort increases.

Time of year	Always/mostly make the most effort I can
Start	12/27
End	21/27

The transcripts from the interviews with the six sample pupils were micro-analyzed using the same method as for the journal, to look for trends relating to effort. All of the six sample pupils perceived that they concentrated more when they were working independently at the end of the year than they did at the start (all names have been changed):

Alyce: When I was younger I used to be more off task, I used to like write a word and then lean back and start talking to them for about five minutes and then write another word and now I just hang my head.

The transcripts from the interviews with all the class at the end of the year were also micro-analyzed to look for trends relating to effort and 25 out of 27 thought they made the most effort they could, which was not the case at the start of the year, showing evidence of improvement.

It's shot up in the time I've been here; I really give it my all.

Conclusion

I find that I am able to influence the children to take considerably more responsibility for their learning activities while working independently through a number of key elements. They could not self-regulate at the start of the year and the evidence gathered indicates that they could within a few months. My lack of interference during independent learning episodes allows them to choose to sit there without working for the whole session if they so wish. Some of them initially do choose to produce very little work and chat. Quite quickly, they all choose to work hard, cease chatting and engage. They listen, disagree respectfully, share responsibility, engage emotionally and adopt self-regulatory habits which are fundamentally based on 'intent', a crucial component of self-regulation – they choose to self-regulate (Glasser, 1998) and this is evident in their learning behaviours.

Several interventions contribute to this change, especially the three key elements that Meyer et al. (2008) identified and discussed earlier. I add to this some other key factors: the act of genuinely listening to children, sharing the shaping and responsibility for the learning taking place, providing regular opportunities for children to practise self-regulating and a dialogic teaching style (Galton, 2007). My teaching philosophy is based on ethical care and rational authority, so that respect is earned (Goodman, 2009).

The findings show a considerable improvement in Year 5 pupils' ability to maintain attention while working away from direct teacher involvement and they all learn to take responsibility for self-regulating while independent. A happy and engaging learning community is successfully established, in which respectful relationships prevail. Evidence is found that standards are significantly raised in terms of attitudes to learning and learning behaviours and a significant presence of respectful relationships.

I enjoy being able to let the children work independently, for several reasons. It allows me to choose how I use my time, rather than being confined to a largely monitoring role. I can concentrate on working with a group or an individual without having to constantly stop and remind others to return to task. It also gives the children the opportunity to experience trust, responsibility, respect, ownership and self-regulatory skills – all of these experiences enabling them to flourish in their development. Finally, the act of sharing responsibility requires that I improve my practice in ways that allow me to resolve the dilemma of experiencing myself as a living contradiction (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005).

The conclusion of the research is that developing independence is a very worthwhile goal, with many benefits to both teacher and children. It is my opinion that this can only be learnt through experience and children can lack the opportunities to work without prompting if we are not careful to provide a mix of teaching approaches. Just as we vary the skills, knowledge and experiences they have, so must we vary our methods.

The evidence shows how happy and respectful both they and I consider our learning environment to be, how much we all enjoy our experiences together and how hard the children work to make their best effort, through choice. I suggest that, as a practitioner, being able to carry out research over a year and collect data to monitor and evaluate classroom experiences makes it possible for me to make these claims with confidence. As the teacher I can report a successful outcome and hope that I have described my experiences sufficiently clearly to allow others to evaluate my work in

such a way that it can influence the practice of other teachers, and thereby contribute to children's educational experiences so that more children may learn to self-regulate within a learning environment that values happiness, kindness, care, respect, justice and compassion.

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