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Independent Learning: the key to personalised learning

Catherine Knowles, Bill Meyer

LSN, London, United Kingdom

Background

This paper will address the key findings of the literature review which also mirror the key elements of independent learning and consider aspects of future exploratory research which is being developed out of the review.

In 2008 LSN was commissioned by the Department of Children, Schools and Families to carry out a review of literature in the field of independent learning (Meyer et al., 2008). The literature suggested that key elements of independent learning may be comprised of factors which are internal and external to learners. The external elements include factors such as the development of strong relationships between teachers and pupils and the establishment of an 'enabling environment' in which information and communications technology (ICT) has a part to play. Internal elements, on the other hand include the development of skills, cognitive, metacognitive and affective, that individual pupils have to acquire. In building a definition of independent learning, key ingredients would need to include the shift of responsibility for the learning process from teacher to pupil. This shift in responsibility involves pupils having an understanding of their own learning, being motivated to learn and collaborating with teachers to structure their learning environment; recent research highlighted 'motivation' as a crucial 'personal factor' in influencing 'engagement' (Haywood et al, 2009:52).

The concept of 'independent learning' is associated with, or part of, a number of

other educational concepts and wider policy agenda of contemporary relevance such

as 'personalised learning', 'student-centred learning' and 'ownership' of learning. Certainly it is one of the essential elements of 'personalised learning' (Sachdev et al., 2007: 108), which the government sees as vital to the continuing development of a system of school education that promotes high quality and lifelong learning and social equity and cohesion (DfES, 2006)

Research Questions

In conducting a literature review and identifying reliable, robust and relevant research, the focus of the study was to explore independent learning and develop a detailed

picture of its different aspects and its possible impact on pupils.

Methods

The mixed-method methodology allowed a rigorous approach to material selection through the use of inclusion and exclusion criteria and an agreed research focus, which is part of the systematic review methodology, to be combined with the flexibility afforded by the realistic synthesis approach (Pawson, 2002; Pawson et al., 2004). The realist synthesis approach ensured that the process of reviewing the literature was rigorous and iterative. It enabled us to refine findings emerging from the syntheses of literature examined and to add evidence at each iteration of the review.

As the review progressed an analytical framework was developed whose aim was to identify and examine factors that appeared to be of practical consequence for the development of independent learning. Though the review necessarily considered relevant theoretical literature in the fields of psychology and pedagogy, its aim was practical - to suggest how theory could be actualized and identify best current practice.

Frame

A framework to develop the analytical review of material accessed through the searches and to explore terms and definitions was developed:

- What is independent learning? - Elements, models, skills required.
- How can teachers promote independent learning? - What works best, kinds of

processes, other conditions, stages in progression.

- What is the role of assessment? - Peer assessment, self-assessment.
- The effects of independent learning - On pupil outcomes, on confidence, on

motivation.

- Challenges of independent learning, how to manage these.
- Pedagogical issues.
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT) - role, impact.

Research findings

UK and international literature indicated that pupils do not become effective

independent learners by themselves. It suggested that pupils need to learn how to learn which can and should be promoted by teachers (Artelt et al., 2003; Van Grinsven and Tillema, 2006). The promotion of these features requires a new role for teachers, based, not on the traditional transmission of information, but on process-oriented teaching, which ensures that pupils are actively involved in the learning process and in becoming lifelong learners (Bolhuis and Voeten, 2001). The promotion of independent learning however is most effective when a whole school approach is taken (Wilson, 2000; Artelt et al., 2003) and teachers are supported in its implementation (Black, 2007; Lucas et al., 2002). In essence when such beneficial factors combine, research literature highlights the wide-ranging benefits for pupils (Van Grinsven and Tillema, 2006).

In carrying out this literature review various challenges and implications for policy and practice became apparent providing a strong theoretical base for further exploratory research within the field of independent learning.

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