

L139251020 - Learning How to Learn - in Classrooms, Schools and Networks

To function successfully in a rapidly changing society where lifelong learning is the norm, pupils need to become independent learners. And, to support them in this, teachers need to integrate strategies into their everyday classroom practice that help pupils learn *how* to learn. Schools need to identify and foster conditions in which independent learning can flourish and create networks whereby successful strategies can be shared quickly and effectively between teachers in the same school and between schools.

The 'Learning How to Learn' project focused on assessment for learning (AfL) to examine how it could be developed as an effective tool in helping pupils learn how to learn. (AfL is an assessment process which aims to encourage pupils to assume greater responsibility for their progress and to become proactive in their learning. Pupils are helped to understand the criteria on which tasks are assessed and the thinking underpinning these criteria.) The research explored how AfL was being implemented in the classroom, how it was being supported at school level and how networks were being used between teachers and schools to share good practice.

Key Findings

Implementation in the classroom

- Most teachers were implementing the procedures of AfL to the letter (eg sharing assessment criteria with learners and accommodating peer- or self-assessment sessions). However, only 20 per cent of them did so in a way which enabled pupils to become more independent as learners.
- This 20 per cent of teachers, who succeeded in communicating the 'spirit' of AfL, shared certain characteristics: they believed strongly in the importance of promoting pupil autonomy and were clear that it was their responsibility to ensure their pupils became independent learners; they reassessed their own practice when things went wrong rather than blaming external factors like the exam system or the pupils' abilities; and they were able to communicate their own commitment to and confidence in the values of independent learning to their pupils who, in turn, adopted them.
- For eight out of ten teachers, however, there was a gap between what they valued and what they practised in the classroom - a gap which narrowed following support by the research team.

Support at school level

- It was important that teachers be given the opportunity to evaluate their classroom practice - and to do so with their colleagues - if they were to become effective promoters of independent learning. This professional development required the support of school leaders.
- School policy initiatives and working groups played a role in effecting change. However, it was vital to create an inclusive school culture which encouraged

independent learning, one in which ideas flowed from the bottom up as well as from the top down in order to create a sense of ownership of change amongst staff.

Using networks

- Surprisingly, teachers and schools made very little use of technology to communicate.
- Communications rarely involved the exchange of ideas about professional practice.
- Large schools, particularly large secondary schools, were complex networks in themselves, making it equally as difficult to share knowledge within the school as it was between schools.
- Analysing the networks available offers a way to exploit these valuable resources.

Conclusion

The researchers noted that the AfL programme had frequently been implemented as a set of instructions handed down to teachers and the over-arching aim of independent learning had got rather lost. However, some project schools achieved notable success in creating cultures of professional reflection and inquiry which supported teachers in promoting independent learning in pupils.

About the Study

Prof Mary James of the Institute of Education, University of London, Prof Robert McCormick of the Open University, Dr Bethan Marshall of King's College London and Dr David Pedder from Cambridge University collaborated on this research project which involved other researchers from these universities. They conducted the research in 40 primary and secondary schools, using questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations.

Key Words

Assessment for learning, school networks, independent learning, primary school, secondary school, classroom practice