

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SKILLS AND USE OF PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

Bernadette Geduld¹, & Lindie Ehlers²

¹Research Unit Self-directed learning, Faculty of Education, North West University (South Africa)

²Gateway Christian School, Mpumalanga (South Africa)

Abstract

In a review of the causes and consequences of the weak outcomes of South Africa's education, researchers reported high drop-out rates before completion of secondary school and that less than five percent of learners who start primary school obtain a university qualification. The recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted an unprecedented change in teaching and learning environments heightened the necessity of self-directed teachers who develop learners' self-regulated learning skills to empower them to manage and regulate their own behaviours. Against the background of poor performance and the central role of teachers in the development of self-regulated learning skills in primary schools, the aim of this paper is to explore teachers' perceptions of their own self-directed learning skills and the teaching strategies they utilise to develop self-regulated learning skills in their learners. The study was located within an interpretivist philosophical orientation and a qualitative research design. We made use of purposive sampling and collected data via semi-structured individual interviews from eleven teachers. Content analysis and a thematic approach were used to analyse the data deductively and inductively. Most participants were confident with their own self-directed learning skills and abilities to develop self-regulated learning skills. Participants revealed that they are well supported in the schooling environment with the needed resources to assist in developing self-regulated learning skills. Participants make use of various strategies, which seem to be more teacher initiated than learner initiated in attempting to teach and develop self-regulated learning skills by engaging in various activities.

Keywords: *Motivation, higher quintile schools, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, teaching strategies.*

1. Introduction

In a review of the causes and consequences of the weak outcomes of South Africa's education, Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) reported high drop-out rates before completion of secondary school and less than five percent of learners who start primary school obtain a university qualification. Due to learning deficits acquired at the primary school level, caused by the low quality of education, the educational battle of many learners is currently already lost at primary school level. We argue that self-directed teachers who develop self-regulated learning (SRL) skills can alleviate high failure rates experienced in many South African schools.

Saks and Leijen (2014), explain that self-directed learning (SDL) originates from adult education, whereas SRL originates from cognitive psychology. SDL is practiced mainly outside the traditional school environment, whereas SRL is a narrower micro-level construct mainly practiced in the school environment where learning tasks are usually set by the teacher. SDL involves involve a broader macro-level construct where individuals create their own learning environments and plan their own learning trajectories in work and life (Gandomkar & Sandars, 2018). Self-direction in learning is linked to most of the skills of SRL such as self-instruction, self-reinforcement, goal setting, planning, selection of strategies and self-evaluation. Furthermore, achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are grounded in the process of SRL as well as SDL (Gandomkar & Sandars, 2018).

Self-regulation is an essential requirement for academic success (Parrish, 2018) since learners must have the abilities to focus, plan, reflect and control their cognition and emotions in the learning processes. Learners who do not have these SRL skills find learning problematic, as they will have

difficulty reflecting on situations, coming up with solutions, and handling difficult situations and emotions.

Slavit and Mcduffie, (2013) aver that it is important to also consider the self-directedness of teachers, for of the role they play in introducing, guiding, modelling self-directedness with their dispositions and teaching practices. For example how they build learners self-confidence to take initiative, to work independently, to persist when difficulties are experienced, to accept responsibility for own learning, exercise self-discipline and curiosity to learn or change to improve themselves. Learners learn by example from their teachers as models for SRL and they practice what they see (Dickinson, 2018).

Against the background of poor performance and the important role of teachers in the development of SRL in primary schools, the following two research questions guided this study: (a) What are teachers' perceptions of their own SDL skills? and (b) What teaching strategies do they utilize to develop SRL skills in their learners?

2. Theoretical framework

In the theoretical and conceptual framework, this study drew on Zimmerman and Moylan's (2009) model of SRL from a social cognitive perspective., the self-directed model of Garrison (1997) and on literature on SDL as well as teachers' self-directed learning skills to develop SRL.

Zimmerman and Moylan's (2009) SRL model is cyclical and has three phases which illustrate all the SRL skills self-regulated learners apply before, during and after a learning task. The effectiveness and duration of these SRL cycles relies strongly on feedback from outside sources (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009), where teachers could play a significant role. In the forethought phase, self-regulated learners analyse tasks, set goals, and plan how to complete learning tasks. During this phase their motivation and self-belief is important, since it influences how they set goals and plan to complete tasks. The performance phase deals with all the SRL skills learners apply during task completion. Examples are, applying time management, actively seeking help when they struggle, using different task strategies and self-observation, to name a few. Lastly, in the self-reflection phase, which consists of self-judgement, self-evaluation and self-reaction, learners will judge their own performance to determine whether the goals they have set have been reached and adapt learning strategies to attain success with future tasks (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009).

SDL is best described by Knowles (1975) as an action where people decide on their own (with or without assistance) to determine their learning needs. In doing so, they establish learning goals as well as the resources they might need while applying effective learning strategies, as well as evaluating the outcome of the learning experience. Self-directedness links to taking control and managing the self and learning activities. The self-directed model of Garrison (1997) consists of three important, closely connected dimensions, which are: self-management (taking responsibility for learning on a cognitive level), motivation (the willingness to take on a task or the reason behind doing what needs to be done), and self-monitoring (reflect on learning, construct meaning). The three dimensions of self-directed learning therefore include motivation, where the teacher gives a task by setting clear goals and giving directions towards what is expected and what will link to the learning process. In this instance, the teacher should provide the required resources and learning material (Garrison, 1997). During the second dimension of self-monitoring, the teacher should guide the learner by giving the choices between how they want to engage and carry out the learning process and deal with questions, answers, and feedback. With the third dimension, which is self-management, the teacher will have to demonstrate to learners how they could manage their learning activity to reach the given outcome or goal. It is therefore vital for teachers to manage and monitor how learners set their goals, how they get the correct resources, and to guide them towards being able to monitor their progress and taking responsibility for the outcome. Teachers should be motivated about guiding students to reach the desired outcome and teaching them to become self-regulated learners; it is therefore important for teachers to be motivated about their own SDL as well (Garrison, 1997). Teachers can apply various strategies to assist the development of SRL, such as observation of the students, explaining, describing and modelling the required cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, strategies for self-instruction, motivational and emotional control strategies and strategies for resource and time management (Harding *et al.*, 2018; Effeney, Carroll and Bahr, 2013; Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009).

3. Research design and methodology

The study was located within an interpretivist philosophical orientation since we wanted to understand the perceptions of teachers on how their own SDL skills enable them to develop SRL skills in learners. A qualitative research design was used during this research. Maree (2016) describes a qualitative

design as a research design that strives to collect very rich and descriptive data about a specific phenomenon with the focus on understanding what is being observed. In this study a basic qualitative research study was used as a strategy of inquiry (Merriam, 2009). The research population consisted of primary school teachers in the Mpumalanga region. We made use of purposive sampling in this study where 11 participants' voluntary took part.

The second author in this study collected data from four primary schools in the Mpumalanga region. Four of the primary school teachers were from a quintile 4-5 school, and seven of the participants were from private schools. All the schools are well equipped with the required resources, such as access to internet, library, and textbooks. Although the schools are well-resourced, teachers in these schools often work with children from different socio-economic and home environments.

We used content analysis and a thematic approach to analyse the data by means of inductive and deductive coding. We applied for ethical clearance from the North West University and gained permission for the research from the Department of Basic Education and school principals. We abided by all ethical aspects of conducting research.

4. Discussion of findings

Verbatim quotes, printed in italics, were used to provide a description of participants' perceptions and experiences. We used codes placed after the verbatim quotations to represent the participants and their schools as follows: T1 S1 indicates the responses of teacher participant one from school one.

The first theme below answers the first research question and are indicative of participants' perceptions of their own SDL skills. The second theme answers the second research question and revealed participants' views of how their SDL skills influence the development of SRL skills in their learners.

4.1. Theme 1: Teachers' perceptions of the self-directed learning skills they possess

To ensure that participants had a clear understanding of SDL skills, they were given examples of SDL skills and were then asked which of the skills they possess and why they think so. It emerged from six (6) participants' responses (T5S2, T8S3, T3S1, T2S5, T10S3, T6S2) that planning, and goal setting are SDL skills they perceive themselves to possess. This is how one participant explained: *To plan, I am a big planner and love to set things out and make lists of what needs to be done and set time limits for myself to reach the goals I have set.* (T5S2).

Participants also perceive themselves to possess the skill of seeking resources by making use of various platforms such as the internet, library, interactive whiteboard, textbooks and so forth to seek help, and by taking responsibility to find the resources they need and keep themselves motivated, as indicated in the following responses: *I seek resources and plan: I research various platform and take responsibility.* (T3S1), and *I do take responsibility for my work and can sustain my own motivation.* (T6S2).

Participants (T2S5, T6S2, T3S1) indicated that with years of teaching experience they have develop many SDL skills to cope with the Departmental requirements for teaching. Participants also reported on some metacognitive strategies they demonstrate, such as reflection, evaluating what they are thinking and planning, being aware of strengths and weaknesses, being aware of learning styles, and planning. This theme revealed that the participants perceive themselves to possess certain SDL skills such as goal setting, planning, seeking resources, taking responsibility, and sustaining their own motivation (Garrison 1997; Knowles, 1975; Saks & Leijen, 2014).

Participants also indicated SDL skills they do not possess. It was noteworthy that a few participants indicated that they do find it challenging to motivate themselves at times and to remain motivated. Some participants indicated that they find it challenging to engage with and adapt to different teaching and learning strategies. The following are examples of their responses: *I struggle to stay motivated, especially when I am struggling.* (T7S2), *I struggle using different teaching and learning strategies when I learn or teach something new. I am not always flexible to try new things and, sustaining my own motivation – I sometimes find it difficult to stay motivated to reach a goal the way I planned to do it from the start.* (T5S2). *To seek resources – I tend to stick with only some and need to broaden the horizon here.* (T6S2). The lack of motivation experienced by participants T7S2; T1S1 and T5S2 can be problematic since motivation creates the platform to commit to certain outcomes and goals related to the SDL and SRL learning process (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Not having confidence in their own abilities might prevent teachers from doing or practising what they have learned.

4.2. Theme 2 Perceptions of own self-directed skills that enable them to develop self-regulated skills in their learners

All participants seem to be actively involved in their attempt to model and demonstrate SRL skills to their learners. They believe they demonstrate supportive roles in guiding students towards the implementation of the required skills (Garrison, 1997). One participant clarified: *Learners detect and perceive things easily. If I have a great level of self-directedness, learners will see it and it will have a positive impact on them. (T11S4).*

The SRL skills participants perceived themselves to develop include the following: Task analysis such as planning and goal setting, where learners are shown how to break their tasks into smaller parts, plan and set goals. Participants' own goal setting and planning skills help them to develop similar skills in their learners. Participants from the private schools use actual goal cards that are provided to learners, where they set daily goals for each subject. In the public schools, the learners are taught to distinguish between different kinds of goals which might include long-term and short-term goals: *I set goals for myself and always encourage learners to set short and medium goals that are achievable (T11S4).*

Participants used various extrinsic motivation methods such as merit systems, positive feedback, and also differentiation in homework and assignments, to promote interest and prevent boredom. External motivation can cause a challenge when it comes to developing self-regulated learners, since intrinsic motivation is the key element when it comes to SRL (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009).

Participants reported the development of task interest and intrinsic motivation by means of passionate presentations of interesting and creative lessons. Once again, the teachers are working hard at motivating learners and keeping them interested, yet little is done or said about getting learners to the point of self-motivation/intrinsic motivation. They develop time management skills in their learners by setting proximal goals for task completions and time limits for classwork. The following two response exemplify their perceptions: *I give learners only a certain amount of time to finish a goal. (T8S3), and I specify time for activities I encourage learners to train themselves to finish a page in max 10 minutes. I have a timer that goes off every 10 min. (T5S2).*

Participants indicated that they encourage help seeking skills to the extent where some are even available to assist after hours: *I encourage them to ask questions in class. I am also available on WhatsApp to assist with homework. (T1S1).* What is noteworthy is the fact that there is a differentiation between seeking help and guiding learners towards the answer, but not actually giving them the answer, thus keeping them accountable in the help seeking process.

Participants indicated they model agency and utilize their knowledge of resources and help seeking skills to encourage learners to make the best use of modern technology such as the internet, and seeking the resources they need, but also informing them about platforms where they can find resources and do some research of their own. Participants believe that their own exposure to these resources enable them to teach their learners how to seek help from others and from technology.

Participants said they create structured environments that limit distractions. A lot of the strategies participants engage in seem to be teacher-initiated rather than learner-initiated, with motivation being more externally focused than internally. Learners with little concentration spans are assisted by means of short brain exercises and short breaks, to learn how to manage themselves during times of distraction. Participants fulfil a supportive role, realizing that not all learners function at the same level of self-regulation and that skills take time to develop. Participants engaged in various attempts to assist learners in applying metacognitive monitoring such as referring to pre-known knowledge before new concepts are learned, giving tests, holding class discussions, mastering concepts and so forth. However, what was noticeable is the fact that participants hardly mentioned task strategies such as cognitive learning strategies, i.e., making summaries, flowcharts, reading strategies, etcetera.

Self-evaluation by means of assessments, notes, class discussions, group work, tests, and self-assessments is another important skill, and participants reported. During the metacognitive monitoring phase participants mentioned the following strategies: use of pre-knowledge to make new concepts accessible, practice testing, quizzes and repetition. One participant explained: *Practice testing – I quiz and encourage learners to recall from memory. Repetition – repeat work or drill work over and over. If you are asked the same question regularly within a year, you would probably know the answer for a very long time. (T8S3).* Class discussions are held to reflect on the work that has been learned and to check their understanding of the work: *I do conference talks for reflection about what is done or not done and how to improve. (T6S2).* It does not, however, seem like learners are guided toward critical analyses of their own progress. Although participants are aware of this strategy, it seems like they find it challenging to completely allow learners to become self-regulated in that they tend to still take a lot of responsibility for the learning process. Participants perceive themselves as being able to work alone and with others and they demonstrate this to learners by introducing them to group and individual activities and getting them to become analytical, but also finding the methods that are helping them as individuals

to be successful: *Planning, working alone, working with others; I have taught my students how to plan, set goals and how to cross it off. Some students find it hard to work with others. By allowing them to work cooperatively helps them to develop areas that is hard for them. (T7S2)*. The ability to complete tasks alone or with the help of others are emphasized as a SRL skill (Knowles, 1975; Saks & Leijen, 2014).

5. Conclusion

The participants in this study all met the three dimensions of SDL according to Garrison's (1997) model. Based on participants responses, the most prominent SDL skills they engage with are goal setting, planning, finding resources, taking responsibility and working on sustaining their own motivation. These findings are in line with what participants indicated when asked about what and how they implement or develop SRL skills. Based on these responses, it is interesting to note that the exact SDL skills participants identify within themselves are also the skills they demonstrate and focus on when modelling SRL to their learners. Although participants were confident in the SDL skills they do possess, they were also very aware of the skills they do not possess and thus not develop in learners, and in itself this awareness is demonstrative of someone who is a self-regulated and self-directed person. Some of these skills mentioned are a lack of technology skills (therefore not being able to utilize resources effectively), sustaining motivation amidst struggles, and to utilize teaching. It is recommended that teachers are exposed to and trained in how to develop metacognitive monitoring skills and different task strategies, since it is a shortcoming that is identified in the analyses of the teaching strategies they use. The development of SDL and SRL skills should form part of teacher training to equip future teachers with knowledge and skills to foster these essential 21st century skills. A strong emphasis should be placed on the practice of constructivist teaching approaches, since this traditional transmission teaching approaches often hinder the development of SRL.

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