EXPLORING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-REGULATED LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS FROM INTERMEDIATE-PHASE TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Keneilwe Agbenyegah[1], & Bernadette Geduld [2]
[1]Tsakani Primary School, Department of Education (South Africa)
[2]Research Unit for Self-directed Learning, North West University (South Africa)

Abstract

The summary report of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU 2018) states the reason for the South African school education crisis and the problem of underperformance in schools is primary schools. Primary schools have not received much attention during the education crisis in keeping up with education, which is suitable for the twenty-first century and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Self-regulated learning skills have become increasingly crucial in the 21st century, both within education and beyond, as it equip learners with knowledge and skills that improve academic performance and lifelong learning. Teachers' perceptions of self-regulated learning play a pivotal role in shaping how learners develop autonomy, motivation, and effective learning strategies to achieve academically. Recognizing and enhancing these perceptions is essential for fostering learning environments that support self-directed and lifelong learning. Teachers' knowledge and beliefs about SRL directly impact their teaching strategies. If teachers lack familiarity or confidence with SRL concepts, they may struggle to integrate these skills into their lessons. A large body of literature attests to the value of developing self-regulated learning skills in learners, and there is thus a need to identify whether teachers are familiar with the concept of self-regulated learning and have the pedagogical content knowledge to promote these skills in their own learners. In the 21st century, the shift toward learner-centered approaches and the growing need for independent, critical thinkers make self-regulated learning a vital educational priority. The study highlights gaps in teachers' knowledge and training about self-regulated learning offering an opportunity to address these deficits through targeted professional development and curriculum reforms. Against this background, the main aim of this study was to explore what intermediate-phase primary school teachers know and believe about the value of self-regulated learning. The qualitative study is situated within an interpretivist research paradigm, which allowed the researchers to investigate a real-life scenario and the influences that shape teachers' perceptions of self-regulated learning in their daily teaching and learning environments. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to select five participants from each of the three schools. Data was collected by single, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Findings indicate while participants see the value of self-regulated learning and their role in fostering it, their limited knowledge and training on the concept hinder effective implementation. Various recommendations are made to address these gaps through professional development courses and training which is essential to enable teachers to guide learners in developing self-regulated learning skills.

Keywords: *Self-regulated learning, teachers, perceptions, pedagogical content knowledge, professional development.*

1. Introduction

Primary schools are the primary source of the South African school education crisis and the issue of low academic performance, according to the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit's (NEEDU 2018) summary report (Agbenyegah, 2022). In the NEEDU (2018) report, the Minister of Basic Education acknowledges the crisis in South African school education, noting that the primary schools, which have received little attention, are a fundamental cause of this underperformance. Moreover, amidst the education crisis, primary schools have not had enough attention to keep up with the Fourth Industrial Revolution and 21st-century education.

In the twenty-first century, self-regulated learning (SRL) skills have grown in importance in the classroom and beyond because they give learners the information and skills they need to succeed academically and pursue lifelong learning (Taranto & Buchanan, 2020). According to Fuentes et al. (2019),

SRL is the process through which learners actively take charge of their educational journey, controlling their behavioral, emotional-motivational, cognitive, and metacognitive elements to meet their academic goals. Self-control in learning environments which is aligned with SRL behaviour improves one's capacity for problem-solving, academic achievement, intrinsic drive, and task interest. Moreover, SRL also offers social and behavioral advantages, particularly within communities of learners engaged in co-regulated or shared regulation (Hadwin et al., 2017).

Teachers' views on SRL significantly influence learners' motivation, autonomy, and study skills (Karlen et al., 2023). Enhancing teachers' perceptions of SRL is crucial for fostering environments that promote SRL, self-directed, and lifelong learning, as teaching practices are shaped by these perceptions (Ehlers, 2022). Teachers unfamiliar with SRL or lacking confidence in it may struggle to integrate SRL practices into their classrooms (Greenquist-Marlett et al., 2025). Studies highlight the need to ensure teachers understand SRL and possess the pedagogical knowledge to guide learners in developing these skills (Greenquist-Marlett et al., 2025; Kramarski & Heaysman, 2021). SRL is a critical priority in the 21st century, aligning with learner-centered approaches and the demand for autonomous, critical thinkers.

Due to the limited research on South African primary school teachers' understanding and beliefs about SRL, this study is essential. South Africa has significantly fewer SRL studies compared to the rest of the world (Alharbi, Paul, Henskens & Hannaford, 2011; Zimmerman, 2013). As noted by Schulze and Van Heerden (2015), most SRL research, both locally and internationally, tends to focus more on higher education rather than on primary and secondary education. The main aim of this study was to explore what intermediate-phase primary school teachers know and believe about the value of self-regulated learning. This investigation furthermore aims to enhance the limited understanding of teachers' perceptions of SRL within the context of primary school education in South Africa.

2. Literature review

Teachers' perceptions of self-regulated learning (SRL) are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, as highlighted by various studies (Greenquist-Marlett et al., 2025). Karlen et al. (2023) emphasize that beliefs, attitudes, and prior knowledge of SRL strategies interact to form teachers' understanding and beliefs about SRL. Central to this process are teachers' general beliefs about education and life, which influence their attitudes and subjective norms. These beliefs often shape teachers' autonomy in teaching and learning and their willingness to adopt new teaching strategies, making it challenging to dissociate their personal views from their professional practices (Dignath, 2016).

Teachers' engagement with SRL is shaped by beliefs in three key areas: epistemological beliefs about knowledge and learning systems, beliefs about SRL promotion and instructional strategies, and self-efficacy beliefs regarding their confidence and ability to foster SRL (Dignath, 2016). Teachers with strong SRL skills are more likely to value and nurture these skills in learners, drawing from their own experiences. Intrinsic factors like competence, motivation, and self-efficacy also influence their perceptions and knowledge of SRL. Hirt et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between teachers' intrinsic interest in SRL and their promotion of these skills in the classroom.

Even when teachers value SRL, limited content knowledge, low motivation, or lack of confidence can hinder their effectiveness (Greenquist-Marlett et al., 2025). Content knowledge includes understanding SRL terminology, models, methods, and components like metacognition. Pedagogical content knowledge involves strategies to help learners develop SRL skills (Karlen et al., 2023). Teachers lacking both forms of knowledge often rely on teacher-directed approaches rather than promoting SRL (Geduld, 2019).

Recent studies found that despite recognizing the importance of SRL in learners' self-regulatory activities, many teachers struggle to explicitly teach or model these skills in the classroom (de Boer et al., 2018; Dignath & Büttner, 2018). A possible reason can be according to Spruce and Bol (2015) a significant gap between teachers' positive perceptions of SRL and their practical knowledge of its strategies. This misalignment between beliefs, knowledge, and practice often results in the failure to effectively foster SRL in learners. Moreover, teachers' mindsets significantly influence their approach to SRL (Karlen et al., 2023). Some teachers hold personal beliefs and fixed mindsets that their learners are incapable of attaining SRL skills, which further limits their willingness to support learners' academic achievement and lifelong learning skills by implementing SRL skills (Spruce & Bol, 2015). On the other hand, teachers with a growth mindset are more likely to believe that both their teaching and their learners' SRL abilities can improve over time, fostering a more supportive learning environment for SRL development (Karlen et al., 2023).

Pre-service and in-service training are essential, as explicit SRL instruction fosters its appreciation. Experienced teachers often develop SRL strategies over time, while novices may need more guidance. School culture, policies, and curriculum emphasizing autonomy, metacognition, and self-assessment can support or hinder SRL efforts (Ehlers, 2022). Teachers' beliefs about students' abilities, motivation, and prior knowledge, as well as their own self-regulation skills, influence their SRL approach and effectiveness

(Karlen et al., 2023). Collaborative environments, resources, and professional development enhance teachers' SRL implementation and understanding, shaping their ability to foster these skills in students (Geduld, 2019).

3. Research design and methodology

The research paradigm, interpretivism, encompasses this qualitative study. Proponents of the interpretative paradigm believe reality is created by subjective perceptions. According to Maree (2016), the interpretivist paradigm serves as the foundation for any study that examines the perspectives and opinions of both individuals and groups regarding a given phenomenon. This study is appropriate for an interpretivist paradigm because it explores the lived experiences, attitudes, and viewpoints of individual primary school intermediate phase teachers as well as their understanding of SRL.

All 4 528 primary school teachers in the Lejweleputswa area, which has 213 schools, made up the study's population. We chose fifteen individuals from three elementary schools using purposive sampling. Data was gathered by the study's first author through single, individual, semi-structured interviews with participants. To analyze the data using inductive coding, we employed a thematic approach and content analysis. Legal authorities, including the Department of Basic Education and school principals, granted us permission to conduct the research after we requested ethical approval from North West University. The University's ethical standards were consistently followed.

4. Discussion of findings

Based on the responses relating to participants' knowledge and beliefs of SRL one main theme, Knowledge and beliefs of SRL, was created.

Participants' knowledge and beliefs of SRL

The main theme and the five sub-themes constructed give insight to participants' knowledge and beliefs of SRL. The five sub-themes are: Prior knowledge of the concept of self-regulated learning, comprehension of the concept self-regulated learning, the value of SRL for academic learning, instruction to utilise and develop self-regulated learning, and the roles of teachers to develop and enhance self-regulated learning.

Prior knowledge of the concept of self-regulated learning

This is how participants responded when asked if they had practical or theoretical knowledge on how to develop SRL skills in learners: *There was no training that I received on self-regulated learning; it is the teacher who must take an initiative by learning more, going to the internet on what strategies to use when I teach learners (P5S2). Another teacher said: No, the curriculum we did that time was different from the one we are doing now but I must say we also like learners to work on their own, to be independent and not always do everything for them (P4S2). No, I was trained on how to teach learners using different teaching strategies and methods, but nothing on self-regulated learning (P2S2)*.

The sub-theme reveals that the teachers' (P3S2, P2S3, P1S2, P4S3, P4S1, P3S3, and P2S1) knowledge and perceptions of SRL are quite limited. Out of 15 participants, only four (P1S1, P3S1, P1S2, P2S2) had prior knowledge of SRL mostly obtained through workshops: *Yes, I came across this strategy during the workshops that I attended (P1S1).* This indicates that formal training on SRL is scarce among the teachers, which may hinder their ability to effectively foster SRL skills in their students. The responses suggest that a significant number of participants (P1S1, P4S1, P3S1, P4S1, P5S2, P4S3) were either unaware of SRL or had vague, uncertain notions about it. This is how one responded: *No, I do not know anything about self-regulated learning or even heard about it (P4S1).* This lack of understanding and gap in awareness can negatively impact their instructional practices, as teachers who are not knowledgeable about SRL may struggle to identify and develop these skills in their learners (Zimmerman, 2000). Consequently, this sub-theme underscores the importance of professional development in SRL for teachers, as it is essential for creating a conducive learning environment that nurtures learners' SRL.

Comprehension of the concept self-regulated learning

The participants who demonstrated an understanding of SRL described it as a process or strategy that learners use when they learn. The following are how the participants explained their understanding of SRL: *Self-regulated learning is to have control, you take responsibility of your work, and you set goals* (P1S3). *Yes, teaching self-regulation in the classroom is important because the emotions and cognitive areas of the brain may not reach the full potential if children do not continually practice at young age. Self-regulated learning helps to support the children ability to handle their emotions and reactions to new situations (P2S3). Self-regulated learning starts from babies to toddlers, pre-school years, adulthood. It is lifelong learning whereby you are able to monitor the emotional state of learners, e.g., frustrations, whether they are coping or not (P3S1).* These participants have a growth mindset towards the development of SRL

and will be more likely to develop supportive learning environments for SRL development (cf. Karlen et al., 2023).

The value of self-regulated learning for academic learning

According to the responses, teachers perceive SRL as valuable for academic achievement and developing confident, knowledgeable learners in the 21st century. They believe SRL enables learners to work independently and take ownership of their learning. Teachers also recognize their role in guiding learners properly, preparing lessons, and avoiding frustration, which can have a positive impact on learners' academic achievement and lifelong learning skills. The following are two examples of teacher's responses: *... if you can see the world outside now, needs people who are motivated and do things on their own (P3S2). Learners should be made more interested in what I'm teaching, they must be inquisitive, I must push them and give them ideas that there is more to what I'm teaching them (P5S2).*

Instruction to utilise and develop self-regulated learning

The majority of teachers did not receive training on how to develop SRL skills in learners during their initial teacher training or subsequent workshops. *There was no training that I received on self-regulated learning; it is the teacher who must take the initiative by learning more and going to the internet on what strategies to use when I teach learners (P5S2).* Another one concurred: *No, the curriculum we did at that time was different from the one we are doing now but I must say we also like learners to work on their own, to be independent, and not always do everything for them (P4S2).* Only two teachers (P1S3 and P1S1) reported receiving some information on SRL, and this was during their further studies or teaching certification programs. Teachers feel that they lack knowledge on how to develop SRL skills in learners and believe they need to take the initiative to learn more, such as through online resources. The teachers' educational programs and training focused more on content-area knowledge and pedagogical methods rather than principles of learning, development, and motivation, which may have contributed to their lack of knowledge of SRL (cf. Geduld, 2019).

Obstacles to positive teacher beliefs about self-regulated learning

This theme revealed the participants' responses to factors that negatively influence their perceptions of SRL. Seven participants *(P1S1, P2S1, P4S1, P5S1, P2S2, P5S3) indicated that time constraints are a challenge.* P2S2 responded: *Time is a challenge because we are forced to cover the curriculum.* A lack of SRL training and professional development, challenging students, overcrowding, inadequate resources, and a lack of parental participation are some of the causes or barriers participants face daily in public schools. The following verbatim quotes encapsulate their negative experiences: *I have never received any support or workshop on SRL; I do everything on my own (P2S3). The majority of learners in my class do not do their homework... (P2S2).*

Overcrowding in classes is a problem, my class has about 50 learners and it is very difficult as a teacher to give all of them individual attention (P4S1)

Lack of resources, in terms of textbooks, posters, and atlases, because I am also teaching Social Sciences, we don't have a globe to show learners the world. (P5S3).

I don't really involve parents because it's actually a waste of time for me because you call parents, sometimes they don't come when they come if you tell them problems you have regarding their children, they will just say they will be involved but they don't. (P4S1)

5. Conclusion

The teachers who participated in this study may not have a deep understanding of SRL, but they have a positive perception of its potential benefits and recognize the importance of a supportive learning environment for its implementation. This suggests that teachers are open to learning more about SRL and are willing to adapt their teaching practices to promote SRL, given the necessary resources and support. Overall, teachers view themselves as facilitators of SRL, recognizing the importance of empowering learners to take charge of their own learning and development.

Targeted professional development on SRL is essential to equip teachers to support learners effectively. Without it, primary school teachers may struggle to implement SRL strategies, leading to passive learning environments and learners lacking essential SRL skills for academic and workforce success. This knowledge gap hinders teachers' ability to identify and support learners struggling with SRL, reducing engagement, motivation, and performance. As a result, learners may remain unprepared to take responsibility for their learning and develop critical 21st-century skills.

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