

Empowerment through learning

Active, integrated, socially constructivist, cognitively constructivist and linguistically rich learning are key aspects of effective early years learning. Underpinning this is the view, indeed the inevitability, of starting with the learner *where he or she is*. It is perhaps impossible to do otherwise. More specifically, at heart is the view that the child is the agent of her/his own learning. Whilst this may be unfashionable to those who see this as woolly-minded, unrealistic liberalism – the well-rehearsed debate about child-centredness and its imputed cause of declining standards – on the other hand the evidence is that it accords with some key principles of effective learning, particularly those of a constructivist hue. Engaged learning and involved learning are key features of empowered children

A celebrated example of empowered learning is the High/Scope project in the US (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority 1996) initially known as the Ypsilanti project from the place of its origin. In the High/Scope project – a popular approach to early years education which is embedded in cognitive and social constructivism – the children are involved in a cycle of Plan-Do-Review. This begins with the sharing of ideas and activities and involves the child taking responsibility for her/his own learning and activities (identifying, planning and choosing them), and in articulating this to the other children and to the teacher in a ‘circle’ time, when the children come together to share their planning and to report on their activities to each other. In the planning stage it is the children themselves who decide what they will do, and the classroom is carefully laid out into different interest areas, with children accessing stored materials at will.

The High/Scope project is based on the principle that learning is both an individual and social activity, with the adults being partners, guides, facilitators and demonstrators (amongst other activities). Morrison (Hohmann *et al.* 1979) suggests that there are three principles on which the High/Scope approach is based:

- 1 Children’s active participation in choosing, organising, reflecting on and evaluating their own learning and activities, facilitated by a teacher.
- 2 Regular daily review and planning by the adults working with the children.
- 3 Developmentally staged goals and resources for learning.

Underpinning the approach are learner autonomy, responsibility and independence, the development of enquiring minds, higher order thinking and the development of reasoning – all elements of empowered individuals. Learning is premised on social and cognitive constructivism in which children interact with their environments, however defined (e.g. social, emotional, cognitive) and different people (adults, children). Learning strives to be cast as problem solving. The intention (Morrison 2000: 122) is to extend play, empower students, and enable them to take responsibility for their own, active and autonomous learning and to develop in all aspects of their learning.

The approach focuses on four elements of a ‘wheel of learning’ with a fifth element – active learning – at the hub, informing the other four elements (Sylva *et al.* 1986):

- classroom arrangements (with centres of interest and clearly labelled storage for open access);
- a daily schedule of plan-do-review sessions;
- key curricular and learning experiences and content;
- assessment through observation, recording and sharing, using authentic assessment and portfolios.

The learning project incorporates detailed and careful documentation by the teachers in terms of fifty-eight key experiences (curriculum aspects such as speaking and listening, writing, reading) which fall into ten categories: (social relations and initiative, language, creative representation, music, movement, classification, seriation, numbers, place, time), and assessment, observational and review data inform the next stage of planning and assessment within these experiences.

The High/Scope day is divided into several elements. A greeting time leads to a small group time, thence to planning time, thence to work time (which, of course, includes play), thence to clear-up and clean-up time, and finally to recall/circle time in which children return to their planning groups,

The results from the High/Scope project and those which, similarly, place emphasis on children taking the initiative, indicate all-round gains over teacher-directed activities (Morrison 2000: 123). Siraj-Blatchford reports greater gains than in control groups made in terms of fewer criminal arrests in adulthood, higher economic status, increased academic performance, and a greater commitment to marriage (Siraj-Blatchford 1999).

Zimiles (Schweinhart 1993) provides very potent support for empowered, progressivist, child-centred learning, based in part on the Bank Street project in the US. Such education, he argues (p. 204), calls for openness to experience, subjectivity and expression, and castigates the model of teaching and learning which produces inhibitions. Rather, he argues, teachers are potentiators of creative thinking and self-awareness. Learning is dynamic, and 'dynamic psychology' underpins early years education; it is open to change and open to a changing world. This negates the view of classrooms as factories and training grounds, producing standardised, pre-figured outcomes. Zimiles reports the longer-term benefits of progressivist, child-centred education. He suggests that the children who had experienced (p. 212) this were more open, flexible, less influenced by gender stereotyping and expectations, more used to making choices, closer to their peer groups, and more able to decentre, more capable of self-expression and holding a line of argument than were their non-progressivist-educated peers. As children, they became attuned to adult modes of behaviour in terms of maturity of judgement; they were more autonomous and self-reliant, took themselves more seriously, and able to engage adult issues at an early age. Put simply, their 'psychological functioning' (p. 213) was more developed. This, he suggests, was because their progressivist education was rooted in respect for children and their autonomous learning; it encouraged them to build on what they already knew and had experienced. It was, in his words, 'an environment that was empowering' (p. 213) and 'enabling for children'; they themselves felt empowered.

References

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