Chapter 1
Describing Self-Directed Learning in Primary Students

ABSTRACT

There have been calls for research into Self-Directed Learning (SDL) for students in schools. This book responds to this call. Chapter 1 describes SDL as being informed by constructivist and cognitivist theories of learning, both of which emphasize the central role of the self in learning. In order to clarify the concept of SDL, it is distinguished from similar descriptions of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) through its focus on internal and external influences. Finally, the chapter reports on research that describes adult SDL, SDL as it relates to very young children, and gifted elementary (primary) school students.

The bell rings and two Year 5 primary school teachers talk as they amble toward the staff room for lunch.

How did your class go with their individual projects?

I don't know, I let the them chose their own investigation topics and gave them time to work on them at school and for homework, but about a quarter of them haven't finished and it is the last week of the term. Some of them just wasted their time at school but I thought they might be getting it done

at home. They just don't seem to be able to organize themselves and stay on track. Some even put information into the project that really had nothing to do with their topic.

I know, I had the same problem. They are supposed to be self-directed in their learning but they don't really know how to do it.

Yes, I thought teaching them about finding information would help them but they seem to need more than that.

I know what you mean, with all this talk of evidence-based teaching it would be good if we had a an assessment of self-directed learning so we would know what the students need to learn about being self-directed and could teach them those things.

True, but what is self-directed learning anyway and how can I help students do it?

INTRODUCTION

It is timely to discuss Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in primary (elementary) school contexts because constructivist approaches to learning that emphasize the need for students to take responsibility for their learning, are being advocated in primary school curricula (ACARA, 2015; DETE, 2001; IBO, 2000). Teachers might teach students general strategies for managing their learning, but it could be that some students already know about these, while others may not benefit because they need other more basic management knowledge and skills. Such a hit or miss approach would make it difficult for teachers to monitor the development of students' knowledge about self-management or the effectiveness of their teaching about self-management of learning.

An evidence-based approach to educational interventions is a key concern addressed here because it is a way of enabling teachers to make 'informed decisions about what will work for them and their students in the unique contexts in which they find themselves' (Horvath & Lodge, 2017, p. 9). An evidence-based approach to developing SDL in primary students and their schools could entail assessing what students know about SDL as a precursor to teaching them about it. Teachers could then teach their students about

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