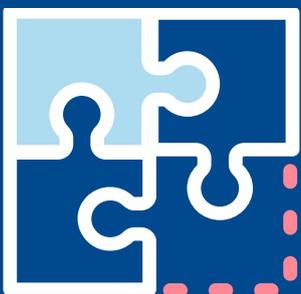


DEVELOPING 21ST CENTURY ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS

Supporting self-regulation in 3-4 year olds

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SUPPORTING SELF-REGULATION IN 3-4 YEAR OLDS

A PILOT

Introduction

Self-regulation has been identified as a 21st Century Essential life skill, underpinning all other aspects of learning with a significant impact on a child's long term life chances. When it comes to Essential Life Skills there is no level playing field, any more than there is for more academic skills. The Department of Education's Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) study identifies an association between socio economic background and self-regulation in the early years (Sammons et al., 2014) and social disparities in confidence later in adolescence (Sammons et al., 2014). Moreover, some of the adverse impacts of poverty are moderated by self-regulatory skills: Low-income children with better self-regulatory skills are more resilient to adverse psychological outcomes (Blair, 2010; Blair & Raver, 2012).

Research strongly suggests that Essential Life Skills are laid down during the early years in the family and preschool. It may be too late to intervene effectively during primary or secondary education; 'getting it right early' is the key to successful intervention.

As children's early development of self-regulation is highly dependent on the quality of their early social interactions, early years educators are in a unique position to have a major beneficial influence on children's development beyond the home environment.

The Early Learning Goals which are measured as part of the Foundation stage profile at the end of Reception year have been revised - in Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) '**self-regulation**', '**managing self**' and '**building relationships**' are replacing 'making relationships', 'self-confidence and self-awareness', and 'managing feelings and behaviour'.

As a result, there is increased interest in Self-Regulation with early years practitioners keen to understand how to best support the children that they work with to meet these goals. Self-Regulation is often defined and interpreted in different ways leading to confusion. This pilot action research project and the resulting manual comes at a particularly pertinent time for the sector as they explore the concepts. It is a resource that has been developed by Dr David Whitebread formerly acting head of the PEDAL centre University of Cambridge. Dr Whitebread is one of the leading academic figures investigating the significance of Self-Regulation in early childhood, drawing on his expertise and wide knowledge of the subject as well as those of other leading academics in the field in particular Nancy Perry.

This pilot project has aimed to bring the maintained and voluntary nursery settings together in a joint training programme focused on supporting self-regulation in the Early Years.



Policy environment for early years settings

It has been a challenging time for early years settings – both voluntary sector and maintained. The initial free 15 hour entitlement to early education focused on improving child development. The recent (2017) expansion of early years spending has been targeted at encouraging parental work by offering more hours of childcare (the 30 hours entitlement for two working parents). There is concern that this has caused a shift in the government's early years policy focus to quantity of places rather than quality of provision. The introduction of the 30 hour offer has also brought increased financial challenges particularly for the voluntary sector nurseries who struggle to survive on the hourly rate for the funded hours when they are no longer able to top up via the remaining hours in the week . This has a knock-on effect on staff recruitment, retention and morale. There was a proposed reduction to existing good funding levels for maintained nurseries, this was granted a brief reprieve by the Children's Minister Nadhim Zahawi and confirmed by Gavin Williamson the Secretary of State at the end of 2019. They were responding to the case made by parents, teachers and nursery practitioners including a march on Downing Street in early 2019. The Sutton Trust also wrote a blog in support of the role played by maintained nurseries.

First key outcome: Three early years settings can demonstrate practical ways of improving self-regulation in areas of disadvantage.

Settings engage in the programme and demonstrate an improvement in understanding of children's self-regulation and sharing of best-practice.

The project took place in three early years settings involving five lead practitioners – two classes from Old Church maintained nursery school, two nursery classes from Redlands primary school (Tower Hamlets) and one class from Bird in Bush voluntary day nursery (Southwark) part of the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) social enterprise nursery chain. They were all selected for the disadvantaged area that they serve, the quality of their practitioners and their commitment to continuous development of their current practice.

All the planning meetings took place at Old Church but visits occurred between all the settings. As we anticipated the involvement of Old Church acting as the "learning hub" added a very helpful element of stability to the project. The commitment of the Head of Old Church, to the project along with the support from the Headteacher at Redlands Primary and CEO of LEYF played a valuable part in the success of the project.

There was an exceptional level of commitment from all the staff involved, but there were occasions when the extra demands of the pilot project served as a reminder of the challenges of tight ratios experienced by the voluntary sector due to funding restraints.

All settings took the opportunity to observe each other's practice at least once and a key component of the training was for the practitioners to share ideas and learn from each other during the training and feedback sessions. Comments included:

"The presentations of other practitioners were really helpful demonstrating how self-regulation could be promoted in early years settings." (Examples of the presentations are included in the manual).

"It was great to see the projects in other settings and share what worked well to promote self-regulation."



Change to practitioners' understanding of self-regulation:

Quotes from practitioners:

"I felt that we had developed a good understanding of self-regulation through all the work we had done during the first part of the course. A good mix of theory and practical."

"I initially thought that self-regulation was synonymous with 'good' behaviour and whilst inhibitory control does play an important role it is not the only component - children who are highly self-regulated have started to develop their metacognitive thinking and have an awareness of not only what it is they have learnt but also how they have learnt it."

"I now know what to look for and what to promote when working with the children to enable them to be more self-regulating."

"It has made me prioritise – giving children the time and space to work things out for themselves."

- *Planning activities to allow as many opportunities as possible for children to make their own decisions*
- *Reinforce learning by enabling children to try new strategies in different contexts*
- *Let the children suggest the activities.*
- *Never say 'be careful to a child trying something new – our anxiety can demotivate children"*

Second key outcome: Children's self-regulation is improved by an approach that can be replicated and shared.

Activities developed, trialled and evidenced. A manualised approach is created which can be shared and is ready for the next stage of evaluation.

This action research project and the resulting manual provides support for early years practitioners who are exploring the concepts of self-regulation and the implications for practice. The manual sets out a professional development program for pre-schools which is designed to enhance their support for self-regulation abilities in children aged 3-4.

April 2018 to March 2019 Dr David Whitebread led an action research project based on an existing model of support for developing Self-Regulation in early childhood.

First phase - the practitioners received training on the key concepts of self-regulation with an opportunity to reflect on existing practice and try out modified ways of working.

Second phase - practitioners planned, delivered and reported on their own projects.

Final phase - the group (5 practitioners and Laura Barbour(Sutton Trust) led by Dr David Whitebread planned and designed the manual to support ongoing dissemination of this model of support. The manual is available on the Sutton Trust website.



The manual lists in detail the project and the qualitative evaluation by the practitioners – separate quantitative evaluation was also carried out by Professor Kathy Sylva’s team from the University of Oxford’s Department of education. Available on the Sutton Trust website.

Impact on children:

Quotes from practitioners:

“Practitioners can play an important role in helping children reflect on their learning. The children were really excited by the activities not because they were new but because they were being encouraged to approach the tasks in a new way.”

“Collaborative problem solving and investigative activities were particularly motivating for children as it creates an environment whereby children and adults are working together as co-learners. After taking the time to reflect on their learning, children were then able to take what they had learnt and reapply this in different situations.”

“Peer tutoring works well , where one child teaches another something they know or have been taught by an adult or another child.”

Practical guidance influencing change:

Children’s Independent Learning Development (CHILD)

provides statements to help monitor children’s self-regulated learning (quotes from practitioners):

“I found the CHILD statements very useful, not only as a way of learning about self-regulation but as a tool to keep what is important at the fronts of our mind. They will be very useful in future staff training.”

“I feel that I would definitely use the CHILD statements to help inform my practice and as a measure for the children that we work with.... using CHILD has helped me feel more confident in being able to promote self-regulation.”

“I am writing more observations which include elements of self-regulation.”

“I now notice children demonstrating many of the CHILD statements on a daily basis.”

Third key outcome: An 'upstream' evaluation model focusing on self-regulation in the early years is developed.

We carried out a feasibility trial including pre and post measures, testing out appropriate measures sensitive to change in self-regulation in the early years.

A field-test of a wide array of measures of self-regulation that could be used in future evaluations to examine the effects of the continuous professional development (CPD) programme on children’s development. A team from the University of Oxford led by Professor Kathy Sylva and May



Shakespeare implemented the trial (full report available on the Sutton Trust website). 46 children were tested at pre-test and the expanded sample at post-testing was 78.

The CHILD measurement tool provides the framework for David Whitebread's approach to supporting children's self-regulated learning in the early years. This pilot was an opportunity to attempt to further validate the tool within the early years context and to examine the correlation with another validated practitioner administered measurement tool, the Child Self-Regulation and Social Behaviour Questionnaire (CSBQ) as well as direct tests administered by external assessors.

Research questions we aimed to answer:

- Do the measures of self-regulation show change over time? In other words, do they show 'improvement' in children that might be attributed to the effect of the CPD programme?
- Are the various measures related to one another? In other words, are they measuring the same or different things?
- How do the measures of self-regulation relate to the British Ability Scale vocabulary test?
- How do the direct, behavioural measures of self-regulation relate to different teacher-completed questionnaires?
- Are the 'hot' (involving emotions) measures of self-regulation related to the 'cool' ones?
- Are the two teacher-completed rating scales for self-regulation related to each other, i.e., measuring similar aspects of children's development?

To summarise:

Children improved (scored significantly higher) at post-test in 16 out of a total of 17 measures. Since all the measures showed significant gains over time, it is suggested that all might be appropriate as evaluation tools to detect the effects of an intervention. In the absence of a control group, the study cannot show that the programme was successful. However, children's gains on virtually all the measures are compatible with the view that the intervention improved children's self-regulation. This is a plausible hypothesis but would require further robust trials including a randomized control group to confirm.

Settings and schools wishing to internally monitor children's progress in terms of self-regulation can use the CHILD, which has been validated in this study through its close association with the CSBQ (which has been validated extensively against other instruments). However, any formal evaluation of the Whitebread professional development programme could not be evaluated via the CHILD since this rating scale is part of the programme itself. Showing improvement on the CHILD would only demonstrate success at 'teaching to the test'. However, formal evaluation of the Whitebread programme could use the CSBQ questionnaire, which is an independent measure and appears to measure the same things as the CHILD. Because the CSBQ is only modestly related to the researcher administered direct tests of self-regulation/executive function, a good outcome battery in any future evaluation would include at least one or two of the direct child tests.



Future Plans

Dissemination:

Our sister organisation the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) identified self-regulation “as a promising area, but one that would benefit from more rigorous evaluation in early years settings to identify how to achieve benefit for young children’s learning.”

This pilot forms an essential step in the evaluation journey of this CPD approach to supporting ‘Self Regulation’ in the Early Years.

We have received interest from the academic world because of the innovative and practical nature of this work within the Early years. Nancy Perry, a leading academic specialising in Self-Regulation in the primary school years, has invited David Whitebread to present on the project at the AERA (American Educational Research Association) conference in San Francisco in April 17-21, 2020.

The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) a social enterprise managing 37 voluntary nurseries (one of which is Bird in Bush) in the London area has expressed an interest in rolling out the training across the LEYF network. This would be an opportunity to test the feasibility of scaling up the delivery of the training model. LEYF also operate as a sector leader, advocating their operation model as one that is economical but high quality.