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Children's Perceptions of their own Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study that looked into the perceptions of learning held by 259 children (girls=107; boys=152) in a primary school in Singapore. Their perceptions are compared with a sample of their teachers and parents perceptions. Using data collected based on a rating scale and a metaphor task, various perceptions of learning were identified. Pupils' ideas of learning are varied with no clear understanding of how they learn. There are also sex and age differences. The perceptions of learning from the teachers incorporate the assumptions and rules that influence the way they perceive knowledge, as well as the way they approach learning tasks. The emergence of these different perceptions of learning from the pupils and teachers support the notion that learning has multiple meanings which may be dependent on the interrelationship between individuals, contexts and cultures.

Introduction

Learning is a very important activity in the life of a child in the school. Every child in the classroom has his or her own notion of what learning is and in today's world, these children are challenged by the demand for metacognitive skills more than ever before. It is important that each child has some understanding of what learning is and to be aware of his/her own thinking. Most young children view learning as 'doing' something, like completing a drawing or counting to ten and sorting out different colors. Pramling's (1983) study on 56 Swedish preschoolers demonstrates that young children typically conceive of learning as doing something and rarely view it as understanding or knowing something. However, these conceptions of learning could be changed if a teacher carried on 'metacognitive' conversations with the children and asked them certain questions. Children can be helped to become aware of what learning means and to become reflective about their own learning.

Pramling identified three main perceptions of learning amongst the preschoolers.

1 Learning as doing:
The lowest level perception of learning is described as the process whereby children believe they can learn by doing something

2 Learning as knowing:
The second level perception of learning is described as the process whereby children believe they have learned when they have come to know something (eg facts, rules).

3 Learning as understanding
The highest level perception of learning is described as the process whereby children believe they have learned when they have come to understand the meaning inherent in an activity or piece of information.

Steketee and Kirkpatrick (1996) interviewed 6 Australian children in a primary school about what learning meant to them and how they went about learning. Their study identified six qualitatively different conceptions of learning held by young children. They are described as such:

1 Generic Learning
Children who hold this conception of learning are not aware of their mental learning processes or whether a mental world exists. They believe that learning will automatically 'happen' as a result of school attendance and good behavior.

2 Physically doing
Children who hold this conception associated learning with something they can do or are learning to do, and often failed to make any distinction between learning and doing. Learning is seen as to involve physical participation in an activity whether it be carrying out a manual or intellectual skill. Activities can involve the whole body.

3 Knowing more things
Knowing about things and how to do things is the focus of this conception. Learning is perceived to be the accumulation of facts that would appear to hold little significance to the students personally. Quantity of learning is emphasized over quality and the more one knows, the smarter he or she is perceived to be. Hence adults are more intelligent than children because they have had a greater opportunity to find things out about their world. Often there is no real description of how information is acquired except to say that the learner absorbs what is seen or heard from a more knowledgeable source such as the teacher, parent, older siblings, older students, books, television etc.

4 Knowing harder things
This is similar to knowing more things in that emphasis is placed on expanding one's body of knowledge. It is more sophisticated and pieces of information are being acquired and built upon previous pieces. The how aspect of this conception is the main factor that distinguishes it from the previous category. While knowledge is simply absorbed in knowing more things, here it is learned by being linked to similar existing structures. Implicit in this process is the metacognitive quality of awareness that knowledge is internally constructed and that learning is a continuous process.

5 Searching for meaning
In contrast to the previous categories, understanding the overall meaning of information is the key to learning in this conception. Learning is seen to involve grasping the meaning of things.

6 Constructing new understandings
In this category the learner is actively involved where thought processes within the student allow him or her to not only grasp meaning inherent in the information but to synthesise this information so that a more personal theory or understanding is constructed...Often the learner will change his or her way of thinking after having considered other points of view.

Perceptions of learning among adults

In their study, Marton et al. (1993) investigated the conceptions of learning of 93 university students in England. They discovered, through interviews, six types of learning conceptions. These are:

Increasing one's knowledge
Memorizing and reproducing
Applying
Understanding
Seeing something in a different way
Changing as a person.

Their study concluded that seeing something in a different way and changing as a person are the most advanced conceptualizations of learning and that some older students do possess a conception of learning as becoming a different person. Adults perceive learning as a constructive enterprise, an activity which is not possible for young children to do. This constructive element has developed various lines of thought with regards to perceptions of human learning. De Corte (1993) proposes that good learning is:

Constructive
Cumulative
Co-operative
Self-regulated
Goal-oriented
Contextual

These six characteristics help to identify occasions when good teaching and learning may exist and to inform teachers how to relate them to pupils' ideas of learning.

Similarly, Saljo (1979) identifies five distinct conceptions of learning as a result of questioning Swedish university students about their personal understanding of learning. These conceptions of learning constitute a hierarchy through which students move as they progress towards more sophisticated understandings of learning. The five qualitatively different conceptions from lowest to highest are:

Learning as increasing one's knowledge
Learning as memorizing and reproducing
Learning as applying
Learning as understanding
Learning as seeing something in a different way

Studying pupils' perceptions of learning in Singapore

A set of 15 statements based on the Likert scale designed by Berry and Sahlberg (1996) was given to 259 pupils in a primary school . This is to give a view of how these boys and girls look at learning. They had to tick a box to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

The questions are of three types:

1) Attitude statements (numbers 1,7,11 and 15) designed to find out about pupils' feelings towards school.
2) Quality of learning statements (numbers 3,4,8,9,10 13 and 14) designed to find out the pupils' answer to the question "what is learning?";
3) Social behavioural statements (numbers 2,5,6 and 12) designed to find out how learning is related to their teachers and peers.

Attitude statements are:

I like being at school
I like most teachers in my school
School gives me valuable knowledge and skills for my future life.
I like my schoolmates in school

Quality of learning statements are;

Learning is mostly memorizing facts
Learning is most effective when the teacher tells me what I need to know.
How I learn is difficult for me to understand
Seeing the link between what I already know and what is to be learnt is important.
I learnt best by doing lots of exercises after watching teachers doing examples.
Learning, in most cases, is transferring knowledge from my teacher to myself.
I am responsible for my own learning.

Social behavioural statements are:

I learn better by doing work by myself than by watching the teacher.
I learn more by working with other students.
I learn better when the teacher is teaching me than working with a group of other students.
The teacher should decide whether what we learn is true or not.

Summary of findings:

1. Over 70% of the total number of pupils have a positive attitude towards learning in schools. More boys than girls agree that schools give them valuable knowledge and skills for their future life and they like their schoolmates in school. Girls on the other hand like being at school more than boys and more girls like most of their teachers.

2 More girls agree that they learn better by doing work by themselves than learn more by working with other students All also agree that the teacher should by watching the teacher but both boys and girls agree that they decide what they learn.

3 The following differences between boys and girls are statistically different.

More girls agree that they learn better when the teacher is teaching them than working with a group of other students.

More boys agree that school gives them valuable knowledge and skills for their future life.

More boys agree that they like their school mates in school.

4 All boys and girls agree that they are responsible for their own learning . They do not agree that learning, in most cases, is transferring knowledge from their teacher to themselves.

Perceptions of learning from the teachers and parents

26 parents and teachers were given the metaphor task as a source for the data collected. This task is based on the version used by Berry and Sahlberg (1996) in their study. The task shows four pictures of real life situations. The teachers were asked to choose one of the pictures that best describes a good learning situation. They are asked to use their imagination to write down who is learning, what or who is doing the teaching and what is being learnt in the picture of their choice. From their descriptions, it is possible to identify whether their ideas of learning falls into an active or a passive learning orientation.

The task was initially designed as a group activity to promote discussion and to explain an individual's ideas, beliefs and conceptions of knowledge and learning. The task has helped to express one's thinking through one particular metaphor. This is based on their description and explanation of the reasons for their choice.

The situations in these four pictures were selected so that they display :

Case 1 individual learning process
Case 2 transfer-of-knowledge situation
Case 3 co-operative or group learning process
Case 4 teacher-centred learning process.

The following indicate the number of teachers who chose the cases.

Case 1 - 9 teachers
Case 2 - 1 teacher
Case 3 - 3 teachers
Case 4 - 13 teachers 50%

As can be seen about half of them selected case 4 which focuses on learning as a teacher-centered process. Learning is highly dependent on the teacher who acts as a guide. However 9 teachers believe that learning is an active process.

Discussion

Two major findings were found from the data analysed which correspond closely to Berry and Sahlberg's study. First the question of learning and what is learning is a difficult task for young children to describe although a few of them do understand their learning processes. The younger child perceives learning to be doing things but as they grow older, their perceptions of learning are more differentiated.

The second finding pointed to the important influence played by the school. The child's perception of learning is based on the practices of the school where he/she is from. Many of their perceptions surround the teacher as an important role model but some manifestation of social learning do occur.

Many pupils seem to perceive learning according to Brody's 'transmission' model more than the 'transaction' model. Brody (1991) uses three broad orientations towards learning as a continuum from 'transmission' to 'transaction' to 'transformation'. These three perspectives offer a suitable way of understanding what pupils believe in their own learning to be. According to Brody, the three conceptions of learning based on his model are:

Transmission model
Learning is transferring knowledge and skills from teacher to learner. Effectiveness of learning is tested in achievement tests and mastery of the content is emphasized. Learning is understood as a linear and simple action.

Transaction model
Learning is empowered through cooperative activities, problem solving and higher order thinking. Productive talk and positive interdependence among the students are essential characteristics of the learning process.

Transformation model.
Learning is a change in learner's experiences and values and the constructive, self-regulative and cooperative processes are emphasized. Learning is seen as a construction of the community of learners.

Our children in the future do need all the three variety of skills according to Brody's model especially of the metacognitive types. It is important we know what their perceptions of learning are and teachers need to identify them in accessible ways. At the same time teachers' perceptions do undergo a change but they need to structure activities and school work that promote their pupils' metacognitive processes of how they learn. Such good skills should be developed everyday in school and at home. Young children can learn how to learn more effectively.

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