



Enhancing Autonomous Learning for Academic Success in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools.

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore strategies used by Zimbabwean teachers to foster learner autonomy in the classroom in the context of poor academic performance in some rural schools in Masvingo. The paper is couched in Thorndike's trial and error theory, especially with reference to the law of multiple responses. A qualitative and instrumental case study design was employed. The study sample of 12 general teachers, 2 Guidance and Counselling teachers, 2 educational psychologists and 24 students was drawn from the target population through a purposive sampling process. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data from the participants. The data were analysed using a thematic content analysis approach. The study's findings revealed that autonomous learning can be enhanced by adopting student centred approaches, use of technology, improving the learning environment, and giving students choices in the selection and development of learning materials. In light of the findings, the study suggests that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education formulate policies that provide guidelines and focus on enhancing autonomous learning in schools with a view to lifelong and productive learning to address poor performance in rural schools.

Key Words: Enhancing, Autonomous learning, Strategies, Academic success, Secondary Schools.

INTRODUCTION

Most rural schools in Zimbabwe have experienced poor performance in public examination despite various interventions to improve learner performance (Magwa & Mohangi, 2022). Thus, in this paper, we argue that self-directed learning can mitigate

poor performance among rural learners. Self-directed learning is the skill that most students in secondary schools in Zimbabwe lack (Magwa, 2016; Matiuro & Nyoni, 2020). Due to various reasons, such as poor academic infrastructure, mass exodus of teachers due to poor salaries, self-directed learning has not been explored as an



alternative to addressing poor performance in the Zimbabwean schools. As such, some teachers still resort to the conventional view of education, where the teacher's authority is unquestionable, while child-centred approaches such as self-directed learning are pushed to the periphery of classroom management (Magwa 2016). Consequently, as McCormack et al. (2021) highlight, learners become passive and poor performance is unavoidable since learners become disempowered in confronting their academic fears and challenges (Padmadewi, 2016). It is against this background that the researchers thought it necessary to explore strategies that can be used to promote autonomous learning in secondary schools, with a view to improving the academic performance of students.

Diverse literature in the past two decades has shown that learner centredness, especially self-directed learning, has been popularly claimed and identified to be an effective learning strategy (Ushie, Basse & Job, 2019; Padmadewi, 2016; Gutierrez & Tomas, 2019). Such body of literature largely agrees that teachers' domain of authoritative knowledge should be challenged, while learners are given more opportunities, responsibilities and power to deal with their learning activities. Once a learner's autonomy is achieved, more often there are positive academic outcomes such as enhanced creativity, the achievement of positive emotions at school, and more effort placed in the educational tasks (Matiuro & Nyoni, 2020; Gutierrez & Tomas, 2019; Padmadewi, 2016). Given the significantly important role of self-directed learning in education, it is worrisome that school

conditions generally do not allow teachers to use self-directed learning despite the benefits associated with it.

Considering the foregoing argument, we argue that our paper is unique in the following ways: It contributes an alternative to addressing poor performance by advocating the use of self-directed learning. Furthermore, it discusses self-directed learning, which is hardly applied to the teaching and learning in Zimbabwean schools, particularly in rural areas. There is very little known in Zimbabwe about autonomous learning.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the above problem, the qualitative research study was underpinned by the research question: What are the strategies of enhancing autonomous learning in Zimbabwe secondary schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'learner autonomy' refers to students' increasing potential for self-directed learning (Magwa & Mohangi, 2022). The concept is synonymous with learner autonomy, self-direction, and self-directed learning, and reflects the idea that students bear the primary responsibility for what and how they learn. Gutierrez and Tomas (2019), assert that autonomous learning is when students are allowed the freedom to determine their behaviour and also if they believe that lessons are meaningful to them. Similarly, Andriani, Padmadewi and Budasi (2018), point out that autonomous learning is a concept in which the learners have the ability to take charge of their own learning.

This implies that various terms, such as learner independence, self-direction, and independent learning, can be used to refer to autonomous learning. In other words, learners should take a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. In autonomous learning, teachers should empower students by giving them significant ownership over their learning, involving them in the decision-making process and giving them responsibility, rather than constantly monitoring, directing and supervising them (McCormack, Flaherty & Liddy 2021). This would help to increase the level of student participation in school life.

Previous research studies on autonomous learning (Gutierrez and Tomas, 2019; Wang and Han 2020) were conducted on adult learners and hardly on young learners. College and university contexts have been frequently studied but less attention has been paid to primary and secondary students. Thus, there is need for further investigations on whether young learners have the potential of self-regulation. Furthermore, studies prior to this one have focused mainly on the importance of autonomous learning (Gutierrez & Tomas 2019; McCormack, Flaherty & Liddy, 2021). However, empirical studies that report what teachers and students can do at secondary level to enhance autonomous learning appears lacking in Zimbabwe. The only research study on autonomous learning that we are aware of in Zimbabwe (Matiuro & Nyoni, 2020) focused on the importance of autonomous learning and recommended the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to establish a comprehensive

framework of how autonomous learning should be promoted in schools. Given these factors, the current study undertook to establish ways of promoting autonomous learning in secondary schools

Theoretical Perspectives: Thorndike's Trial and Error Theory

We utilised Thorndike's Trial and Error Theory as a lens to understand autonomous learning in secondary schools. In one of his experiments with cats, Thorndike put a hungry cat in a puzzle-box that would open only if the cat pulled a certain string, stepped on a pedal or worked whatever other device had been arranged to open the latch during the experiment. He then put food outside the box, in plain view of the hungry cat. From the very first, the cat would scratch, leap, try to squeeze through the bars of the box and generally engage in various responses. Sometime during the vigorous and random activity, the cat would happen to open or work the particular escape device, the latch would open and the cat would be freed to eat the meat outside. Aligned to autonomous learning, learners should be allowed many chances to try to solve problems by themselves (Karadut, 2012). This can be done by making use of teaching methods such as the discovery method in Science and Technology. In Science experiments, children should only be presented with suitable media and a statement of the problem. The teacher should leave the children to work out on the setting and seek by themselves the solution that suits their context. In Thorndike's experiment, the cat did everything it could to escape and, similarly, learners should work on the set

environment to seek solutions to problems presented. Learners would get the solution if the environment and media are suitable because unceasing activity led the cat to success. It is, therefore, important for the teacher to give pupils as many opportunities to work on the environment, to manipulate objects and come up with possible solutions for learning to occur. Curzon (1990) says that the technique of lecturing is generally unproductive and the commonest error. This means that the teacher should let learners themselves work on the environment as much as possible for their own learning, as opposed to telling people facts, for that would not help them to learn. In line with this, Boyadzhieva (2016) asserts that the learner has the freedom to plan and control his own learning by choosing what, when and how to learn, in compliance with his own needs, interests and abilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach for an in-depth look into how autonomous learning can be promoted in secondary schools. This type of research is helpful for a study which describes what, how or why something happened (Maree, 2015). Therefore, the qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate as it aimed to explore strategies that can be used to foster learner autonomy in secondary schools. The case study design was employed in this study because it enabled multiple methods for data collection and analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Two secondary schools in Masvingo District were purposively sampled, resulting in a sample of 24 students: 12 general

teachers, 2 educational psychologists and 2 guidance and counselling teachers comprising 40 male and female participants. The selection criteria were based on the participants’ potential to contribute rich and valuable information to the study.

Table 1: Participants

Category	Number (n)	Research Site	Inclusion criteria
1. Students	24	School	Form 5 - male and female
2. General teachers	12	School	Male and female with more years of teaching experience
3. Educational psychologists	2	District	Male and female
4. Guidance and counselling teachers	2	School	Male and female with more years of experience

Data were gathered from in-depth individual interviews with the guidance and counselling teachers and educational psychologists. Focus group discussions, in separate groups, were conducted with students and teachers. Interviews and focus group discussions allowed us to interact with the participants, leading to multiple views on ways of enhancing autonomous learning for academic success.

Data were analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark,



2006). Interview transcripts were read and re-read to align with the first step or familiarisation of the data. In the second step, the data were coded. In this case, coding schemes were used to simplify the correlations in the data. In the third instance, patterns and repetitions in the data sets were recorded and finally, the recurring patterns were collated into themes.

Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate authority after meeting requirements for privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and assent, and voluntary participation. Before entering research sites, permission was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. Ethical considerations, for example, assuring participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences, were explained to the participants. Member checking processes contributed to the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings, while quality assurance criteria of dependability, conformability, transferability and credibility were employed.

FINDINGS

Strategies that Enhance Autonomous Learning in Secondary Schools

The research question sought to explore the strategies that can be used by teachers to promote autonomous learning in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Four major sub-themes that emanate from the research question are discussed next. These sub-themes are learner-centred teaching and learning methods, use of technology, and providing students with choices in the

selection and development of learning materials. In the following section, the first theme, which is learner-centred teaching and learning, is discussed.

Sub-theme A: Learner Centred Teaching and Learning Methods

The study established that learner-centred teaching and learning methods that allow students' active involvement in the learning process can help to promote autonomous learning in the classroom. All participants agreed that teaching methods that are student-centred could help to enhance autonomous learning. Participants suggested creative learning activities that are not always classroom-based but involve a wide range of activities. In support of this view, one of the students said:

As students, we do not want to spend time in the four walls of the classroom, where lecturing and note taking are the norm. We want to take ownership of the learning process. We are interested in teaching methods such as discovery, field trips, group work and many others which engage us to have control over the learning process.

While students advocate control over their learning process to foster autonomous learning, teachers in the study recommended a 'discovery' approach to teaching and learning. For example, one teacher elaborated thus:

To strengthen autonomous learning, teachers should use teaching methods that allow students to be actively involved in the learning process such as discovery method. Students should be given an opportunity to

try and solve problems by themselves. For example, in the Integrated Science experiments, students should be presented with suitable media and a statement of the problem. The teacher should leave the students to work on their own and seek by themselves the solutions that address their problem.

The point being made is that students should be allowed to become actively involved and work independently on problem-solving and discovery to enhance their learning.

Educational psychologists were also of the opinion that student-centred practices enhance autonomous learning. One of the educational psychologists stated:

Teachers should leave the children to work on the setting and seek by themselves the solution that suits their context.

The above view implies that there should be full involvement of students in the teaching and learning process, using student-centred approaches by the teacher. The Guidance and Counselling teachers also shared the same sentiments on the importance of student-centred instructions with reciprocal interaction to foster independent learning in the classroom. For example, a Guidance and Counselling teacher expressed his views as follows:

Students would engage in self-directed learning if teachers use more student-focused instruction.

The above quotation suggests that a student-focused approach would help to strengthen autonomous learning.

In support of the findings above, Boyadzhieva (2016), asserts that the concept of learner autonomy contributed immensely to the dramatic shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach. This implies that a learner who at the time was treated as an empty vessel, is now expected to actively participate in the teaching and learning process to foster autonomous learning in the classroom. Similarly, Almusharraf and Agudo (2020), point out that for learner autonomy to develop, the teacher's role must be shifted from teacher-focused to student-focused instruction. In this sense, the teacher should use learner-centred teaching and learning methods that promote learner autonomy. Students should be allowed many chances to try to solve problems by themselves. That can be done by making use of teaching methods such as the discovery method in Science and Physical Education. In science experiments, students should only be presented with suitable media and a statement of the problem and the teacher should leave the children to work out on the setting and seek by themselves the solution that suits their context. In the same vein, a study by Magwa (2018), revealed that the teachers should make use of several of learner-centred methods that may help students to gain power in the classroom. This implies that students would have a voice in the selection of learning activities that are meaningful to their lives. Findings from this study resonate well with the ideas of Vygotsky. Vygotsky's theory requires the teacher and the students to play untraditional roles as they collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating her/his meaning to the students for future recitation, a teacher

should collaborate with his/her students to create meaning in ways that the students can make their own. Aligned to Thorndike's Trial and Error Theory, the students would develop autonomy if they are given a chance to work on the environment as much as possible for their own learning as opposed to telling the students facts, for that would not help them to learn.

Sub-theme B: Use of Technology

The study established that the use of technology can help to foster a learner's autonomy in classroom learning. In support of the above view, one of the students had this to say:

Mobile learning can help us to be personally in control of the learning process, deciding our preferable time, place and pace to do school work

This implies that mobile learning is more effective than face-to-face teaching and learning. Teachers also shared the same sentiments on the importance of using technology in promoting autonomous learning. One of the teachers expressed her sentiment as follows:

Use of technology can help to enhance self-directed learning as students can use personal computers and gadgets at home to learn without the teacher.

The above quotation suggests that teachers should encourage their students to use mobile platforms to gain better autonomy. Guidance and Counselling teachers were also of the opinion that the use of technology enhances autonomous

learning. One of the Guidance and Counselling teachers stated:

The use of technology can help students to be in control of their learning. What is important is that teachers should guide and assist students to use mobile platforms productively.

This implies that there is a need to guide students on the use of technology to protect them from being distracted by unrelated sources. Similarly, an educational psychologist indicated that:

Mobile learning is indispensable to develop and enhance autonomous learning. Through mobile learning, students can supervise the pace of their learning and decide the direction of their learning.

The implication of the above view is that the use of technology can help students to be responsible for their own learning.

In line with the above finding, a study by Melvina, Lengkanawari and Yanty (2020), established that technology is very useful in promoting autonomous learning. Similarly, Durriyah and Zuhdi (2018) found that popular digital technologies such as Facebook, Skype and WhatsApp offer unique potential to facilitate and improve autonomous learning. This implies that learners can control their learning processes as much as possible and can become quite independent of teachers when they work with technology. A study by Agustina (2017) also revealed that use of Facebook, Twitter and E-mail are effective for promoting students' autonomous learning. The implication of the above view is that when students are relaxed

and independent, they are likely to take personal accountability for their own learning. Mataram (2020) concurs with the view that the use of technology can help students to be personally in control of the learning process by deciding the preferable time, place and pace of learning. In line with the constructivist theory, students can make use of computers and the internet to construct rich knowledge for self-directed learning.

Sub-theme C: Presenting Students With Choices in the Selection and Development of Teaching and Learning Materials

The study revealed that allowing students to take initiatives in setting their learning goals can help to cement autonomous learning in the classroom. In support of this view, one of the students during a focus group discussion expressed her sentiments as follows:

We want independent learning, for this reason, teachers should allow us to take more responsibility for our learning. It is like you are unlocking something in yourself and without the teacher telling you what to do.

The implication of the above quotation is that for autonomous learning to occur, learners should have more influence in the learning process. One of the general teachers stated that:

The student should be at the centre of the learning process and teaching process should be focused on him for autonomous learning to develop. The teacher should be a facilitator, motivator and guider to help students to get their proposed goals.

The implication of the above view is that teachers should let students themselves work on the environment as much as possible for their own learning, as opposed to telling people facts because that would not help them to learn. One of the Guidance and Counselling teachers stated that:

For autonomous learning to occur, teachers should give students as many opportunities to work on the environment, to manipulate objects and come up with possible solutions to problems.

An educational psychologist suggested that:

If students are given the choices to select learning activities that are meaningful to their lives, they participate more actively in the learning process.

The implication of the above quotation is that if students are presented with choices in the selection and development of teaching and learning materials, they are more likely to participate actively in the learning process.

Similar to the above findings, Boyadzhieva (2016), asserts that learner autonomy was initially defined as the ability on the part of the learner to take charge of own learning. This means that the learner has the freedom to plan and control his/her own learning by choosing what, when and how to learn in compliance with their own needs, interests and abilities. Furthermore, Boyadzhieva (2016), adds that the students should participate in formulating their own goals instead of the adult or expert selecting the content based on his view of what would

be important to the learner in the future. This implies that for autonomous learning to develop in the classroom, the teacher should tell students the objectives and significance of the learning activities before they start to work to achieve them. Students would, in such a situation, have a statement of the problem or task to do and find a solution to and, therefore, would continue working. Students need to be encouraged to develop their own learning strategies and, in that way, start a process of becoming autonomous learners. According to Kashefian-Naeeni and Kouhpeyma (2020), students should have the ability to decide over the classroom activities and evaluate their learning outcomes. Similarly, a study by Magwa (2018), established that the most effective and practical way that gives students a voice in the classroom is fully engaging them in the development of the classroom rules or behavioural guidelines. Drawing from Thorndike's Trial and Error Theory, for autonomous learning to develop, students should have the power or right to regulate and control their own learning activities. Similarly, Vygotsky's theory requires the teacher and the students to play untraditional roles as they collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher imposing his/her meaning onto students for future recitation, the teacher should work together with his/her students to create meaning in ways that the students can make their own.

Sub-theme D: Improving the Learning Environment

The study established that the state of the learning environment cultivates students' autonomous learning ability. Participants

have linked the state of the learning environment with enhanced autonomous learning. This implies that an oppressive and restrictive learning environment results in the development of an authority figure within a subordinate student-teacher relationship, whereas equal sharing of the learning environment promotes the development of self-directed learning among students. Magwa (2016) avers that an oppressive and restrictive learning environment refers to a learning environment characterised by an imbalance in power sharing between the teacher and the students. This implies that in such learning environments, there is the imposition of teaching and learning activities by the teacher who seeks to inculcate habits of docility, receptivity and obedience in the students. In this sense, an oppressive and restrictive learning environment does not provide the students with the opportunities to have a say in the selection and development of learning activities. In support of the above view, an educational psychologist expressed his sentiments as follows:

I think the learning environment contributes a big share towards the development of autonomous learning. To exemplify this, if the learning environment is oppressive and restrictive, this can lead to the development of an authority figure within a subordinate student-teacher relationship. On the other hand, if the teacher loosens the classroom atmosphere so that learning can take place in a natural lifelike atmosphere, students can feel free to express themselves.

Another educational psychologist explained:

Some teachers in secondary schools still hold the traditional view of education that learners must submit themselves to teachers and that teachers' authority should not be questioned. In this sense, if a teacher is a power figure in the class, students and the teacher are likely to develop an authority figure within a subordinate student-teacher relationship. On the other hand, if the teacher and students take control of the learning environment, they are likely to develop autonomy.

It is implicit that the educational psychologists emphasise on the fact that the state of the learning environment was indeed a factor that promoted independent learning. Almost similarly, during the focus group discussions, the students supported the fact that the learning environment is a crucial factor affecting autonomous learning. One of the students expressed her views as follows:

If we have a sense of ownership and control over the learning process and learn from each other in a safe and trusting environment, autonomous learning can develop.

The implication of the above view is that students should take maximum responsibility for what and how they learn. During the focus group discussions, another student also added that:

If we have influence in class processes and decisions, we are likely to develop autonomy.

The above quotation implies that the way power is shared in the classroom between the teacher and the students

contributes a lot to the development of autonomous learning. Pertaining to the issue of the learning environment as a factor that promote autonomous learning, one of the general teachers, during the focus group discussion, expressed his sentiments as follows:

As teachers, we should create a learning environment that helps pupils to gain power in the classroom. Following this logic, teachers should not be dominant but should allow learners to have influence in the learning process. There should be reciprocal power relationship with pupils in the classroom for the development of self-directed learning.

It seems that the state of the learning environment is indeed a factor to consider in the development of autonomous learning. The Guidance and Counselling teachers also confirmed the importance of the learning environment in the development of student's autonomy. One of the guidance and counselling teachers added that:

A power balanced learning environment can result in students enjoying self-directed learning. Whereas, an imbalance in power ownership, can result in an authority figure within a subordinate student-teacher relationship.

In view of the above responses, it is important to note that the state of the learning environment can help to enhance students' autonomy in the teaching and learning process. According to Mataram (2020), the learning environment is a crucial factor affecting autonomous learning. This implies that if the learning environment has abundant

and numerous resources, students can develop autonomy through the selection of proper learning materials and sorting out the needed information. In line with the above view, Almusharraf and Agudo (2020) highlight the importance of generating a supportive teaching and learning environment that promotes students' persistence in learning rather than the pure acquisition of knowledge and subject matter. They further point out that for learner autonomy to develop, the teacher's role must be shifted from teacher focused to student focused instruction. The point being made is that the learning environment should allow students to become actively involved and work independently for autonomous learning to develop. Similarly, Chatrawee, Pornapit and Hayo (2020) assert that teachers are expected to be facilitators who create a learning environment in which students can take control of their learning. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development lays the foundation for teachers to connect with their students by making the learning environment meaningful to the learners. In this sense, a learning environment that promotes student's persistence in learning can act as a scaffold in the development of a self-directed learning.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up what has been discussed above, it is of vital significance to foster autonomous learning in schools using learner centred approach, use of technology, improving the learning environment and providing students with choices in the selection and development of learning materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above findings on ways of enhancing autonomous learning, the following recommendations are made for policy, practice and further research in all teaching and learning environments:

1. There should be formulation of tertiary and secondary level policies that provide guidelines and focus on enhancing autonomous learning with a view to lifelong and productive learning.
2. The teacher training curricula in colleges and universities in Zimbabwe should include some common learning strategies that promote autonomous learning.
3. There is a need for the government of Zimbabwe to deliberately organise seminars, conferences, workshops and other symposia where experts can be invited to teach teachers to embrace autonomous learning.

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