

# Their own mind

How can practitioners help children become independent thinkers? **Elizabeth Powell** early years leader at Horsforth Newlaithes Primary School, shares her experience

**W**hether it is data for a management team who don't understand about early years, an ever-increasing obsession with phonics or preparation for an Ofsted, developing children as independent, active learners has been lost as a primary focus in many settings.

The *Tickell review* (2011) stated that agency is crucial for learners and supports all seven areas of learning. It also states how motivation to learn and the cognitive skills required to be an effective learner are 'determinants of academic success'. In short, developing the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) and self-regulation skills are a priority, not an option. After all, isn't our business supporting the children to be lifelong learners with the best chance of adult life satisfaction?

At Newlaithes, we give prospective job candidates the opportunity to show us what their image of the child is through less-structured tasks, allowing them to 'see' the children as learners and talk about their observations, focusing on learning characteristics. Once employed, we work together to support the children with their bespoke programmes, developing the motivation, skill and self-regulation necessary to be excellent learners in their own right. No predetermined objectives cloud our

focus. Our aim remains supporting each individual to be the most actively engaged and excited learner they can be.

Helping children come up with independent plans takes lots of modelling, guidance and support in the beginning. Starting with children's interests and fascinations, we help them to formulate an idea in a favourite area of provision, or a new one which has not yet been experienced by the child. In the autumn term we only plan with a few children at a time, in

**Henry and his pirate ship at Horsforth Newlaithes**



collaboration with the class. We use everyone's creativity until we reach a moment of excitement. We also draw on the world around us to get inspired. By January, most children are able to come up with ideas they are happy with independently. Henry, in the case study below, knew he wanted to make a pirate ship. He initially told me that 'making a pirate isn't independent learning time [ILT]'. This meant he thought this would be too easy for him and would not be in his 'Goldilocks' Zone' (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development).

When recently reading a book about schools at home, he reflected on the fact that the school in the book did not have ILT.

**Henry:** But where's the ILT? When do they make plans and challenge themselves?

I asked Henry's mum more about this quote.

**Henry's mum:** He said he thought that when he started school it would all just be learning on the mat. I asked him what he thought that would be like and he said he would be sad because ILT is the best bit and you get to choose whatever you want to do and it's exciting.

## CASE STUDY: THE PIRATE SHIP – AN INDEPENDENT PROJECT

Henry knew he needed to plan what his ship would look like and used the internet to look at a few examples, drawing his own design. He

### how to support children as critical thinkers

- Have open-ended tasks at the recruitment phase to allow practitioners to show what they understand about effective learning and supporting this.
- Work with children on open-ended self-chosen tasks so that children's capabilities can be showcased and the team can witness and support these developments together without any other focus in mind.
- Support staff in the use of questioning to develop the skills of critical thinking with the children.
- Allow the children daily sessions where they lead their own learning (independent learning time, ILT), choosing their own projects and being supported by adults who do not have other learning agendas.
- Involve parents in understanding how children learn, including the need for agency and self-regulation skills so that these can be developed at home as well.

independently began making the hull of the boat, building it up with separate pieces of card and PVA glue. Working alongside his friend, a chat about the relative merits of tape and runny glue ensued.

**Joseph:** Runny glue is much stronger than sticky tape. I used to think sticky tape was stronger.

**Henry:** Yes, with runny glue you have to be patient. It takes longer.

**Henry:** It's too small [canon hole].

*He looked at his plan closely.*

**Henry:** Actually, it is smaller on my plan.

When it came to drawing the skull and crossbones, Henry used a YouTube drawing tutorial and worked hard to perfect his representation. After nine attempts, critiquing his own work plus receiving feedback from practitioners, he reached the final version. With support from an adult, he used the photocopier to reduce the size of his drawing, so it would fit on the flag. Finally, he added the canon holes and window, then his pirate ship was ready to play with. Success!

**Henry:** The trickiest bit was definitely the flag. Elizabeth drew a skull and I tried to copy it and that wobbly bit at the bottom is the teeth. I watched a video to help me.

### My observations

There is so much agency and active learning on display here: Henry often critiqued his own work and ensured he used his plan often. When drawing his flag, he had done six attempts, each a development on the previous one, before he came to me for feedback. This is when I modelled drawing the flag and talked through the lines and shapes I could see. I used mathematical vocabulary and was precise in describing what I could see and also what I was doing, including making mistakes and modelling what to do when this happens.

Henry has come a long way. At the start of Reception, he did not like getting out of his comfort zone and preferred to stick to activities he had done a lot. Using fine motor skills was a challenge and still is for him. Persevering was not something Henry used to do and he certainly would have never done this independently. Now he can sustain focus and understands about the skills he is developing, which is crucially important.

### How did we facilitate this?

Modelling by practitioners is crucial in supporting self-reflection and self-regulation skills. We use a lot of story books, such as *Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall and the YouTube clip 'Austin's Butterfly', to help the children to be effective and reflective learners who are able to critique their own work and also seek feedback from others, children

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and adults alike. In sessions we call Learning Review, we discuss the children's work and talk about what they have done well and next steps. This is also done with the whole class, and sometimes the whole cohort, as learning is cascaded down to all of the children, meaning that all children learn from each other and from adults every day.

In the planning and learning review sessions we have a high expectation of vocabulary and use precise, accurate and scientific vocabulary in conjunction with everyday language. For example, Henry was able to use the word 'patient' accurately when talking about PVA glue, as we talk a lot when discussing DT projects about the relative merits of differing joining techniques.

Tools and resources are modelled and critiqued in planning, ILT and learning review sessions by all practitioners. Persevering is an expectation and children who are finding the steps towards this difficult have their next steps tailored to them and broken down further. Some children work in small project groups of four to six to develop their individual learning characteristics in a group context and with more direct and regular modelling, support and guidance from an adult.

Humanity and all its perfectly normal imperfections are discussed and self-acceptance taught. Believing children can achieve, if their project is in their Goldilocks' Zone (a phrase used by children and adults) is the drive to ensure each child is as successful as independently as possible. ■

*Elizabeth Powell is launching early years consultancy the Dear Academy*



## how independent learning time has helped Henry

Henry's mum: 'Henry's independence and resilience at home has improved beyond recognition. He wants to do things for himself now and he actively looks for ways to solve problems if things are a bit tricky at first. Henry has wanted to do lots of drawing over the last few days and the difference in his drawings over recent weeks is quite

incredible. You can now see what he's trying to draw and he looks back at the figure or picture or whatever it might be that he's copying and he instinctively gives himself feedback and makes changes. He's wanting to write much more too, which is great. He's asking to write full birthday cards, etc.'

