SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

ÎNVĂȚAREA AUTODIRIJATĂ

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Sumar. *Acest articol explorează învățarea autodirijată ca metodă de predare care îi dotează pe elevi cu abilități care depășesc cele oferite de școlile publice tradiționale. Educația se schimbă, încorporând idei precum sălile de clasă deschise, școlile fără clase și studiul independent. Aceste abordări pun accent pe capacitatea elevilor de a lua inițiativa în propria educație. Într-o epocă a schimbărilor tehnologice rapide, scopul educației nu mai este fix - multe abilități devin învechite în decurs de un deceniu, un fenomen pe care Alain Toffler îl numește „șoc viitor" (1). Prin urmare, educația trebuie să se concentreze pe dezvoltarea abilităților de investigare și a adaptabilității. Învățarea nu mai este limitată la sala de clasă; aceasta are loc continuu prin experiențe de viață. Actul de a fi învățat este acum la egalitate cu actul de a trăi. Fiecare decizie devine o experiență de învățare, iar educația devine un proces pe tot parcursul vieții. În acest context, învățarea autodirijată nu este doar benefică - este esențială pentru supraviețuire într-o lume în continuă evoluție.*

Cuvinte-cheie*: educație, învățare autodirijată, investigare, adaptabilitate, educație.*

INTRODUCTION

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in primary education emphasizes students' capacity to independently assess their learning needs and engage in inquiry-driven activities to explore areas of interest (2) (3). Central to SDL is the concept of self-management, which has been linked to individual learner characteristics that influence a student's progression toward greater autonomy (4). Although initially associated with more gifted students, SDL is increasingly recognized as a valuable approach for all students, provided there is a clear understanding of what SDL entails within the primary school context.

The model of SDL for young students conceptualizes learning as shaped by both *internal* and *external influences* (4).

Internal influences refer to the personal characteristics and cognitive strategies that a learner brings to the educational context. These include:

1. Attitudes and Dispositions: A student's willingness to engage with learning, curiosity, openness to challenge, and resilience in the face of difficulty directly influence their ability to pursue learning independently. Positive dispositions—such as initiative, and confidence (3) (4).

2. Motivation: Intrinsic motivation is a key internal driver of SDL. Students who find personal relevance in their learning tasks are more likely to set goals, and persist through difficulties. This motivation is closely tied to the student's perception of their capacity to succeed, as well as *causal attributions*, which influence how they interpret success and failure (3) (4).

3. Metacognitive and Self-Regulatory Strategies: These include the learner's ability to plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning processes. Effective SDL requires students to engage in metacognitive thinking such as deciding what to learn, how to learn it, and how to evaluate their own progress. Self-regulated learners are strategic and reflective in managing their time, resources, and emotions (3) (4).

Together, these internal components support the learner's autonomy and provide the cognitive and emotional resources necessary for engaging with inquiry-based and open-ended tasks.

On the other hand, external influences refer to the environmental, instructional, and structural factors that support SDL. While internal factors originate within the learner, external factors establish the conditions under which SDL can develop and be sustained. Key external influences include:

1. Classroom Environment and Organization: A flexible and supportive classroom climate encourages exploration, and independence. Classroom structures that allow for collaboration, and differentiated pacing that allow students to take initiative while still receiving support when needed (3) (4).

2. Teacher Role and Instructional Strategies: Teachers play a critical role as facilitators and co-learners in SDL environments. Through scaffolding, and providing feedback teachers help students develop the competences needed for self-direction. Instructional strategies such as inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning are particularly effective in this regard (3) (4).

3. Curriculum and Task Design: SDL thrives in curriculum designs that promote authentic inquiry, relevance, and real-world application. Tasks should be sufficiently open-ended to allow for choice and creativity, while still offering structure through clear goals (3) (4).

4. Resources and Tools: Access to diverse learning resources such as books or technology, enhances students' ability to pursue their inquiries and construct knowledge independently (3) (4).

5. Social Interaction: The role of peers and the social context of learning cannot be underestimated. Collaboration, discussion, and feedback exchanges with classmates contribute to the development of SDL by allowing students to articulate their thinking, negotiate understanding, and reflect on different viewpoints (3) (4).

The interaction between internal and external influences is dynamic and reciprocal. A supportive external environment can foster the development of internal SDL capacities, while internally motivated and self-regulated students are better able to take advantage of opportunities provided by their learning environment. For example, a well-designed inquiry task (external) may inspire persistence and deeper engagement (internal), which in turn leads to greater independence and reflection (2) (3) (4).

SELF-DIRECT LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Self-direct learning has a wide range of benefits, but the down part is the fact that usually it is used only at class level and not in a whole school. In the classroom, the teacher is free to modify and adapt to any given circumstances, this way creating the needed environment to simulate students` involvement and creativity. But for better results, this type of class management could be moved up towards a whole school management (5).

The implementation of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in schools typically, and ideally, begins with a whole-school approach, in which the principles of learner autonomy, self-management, and reflective learning are embedded into the school's vision, values, and policies. Rather than treating SDL as an isolated instructional method, schools adopt it as a core pedagogical philosophy that informs curriculum planning, teacher training, and student assessment (6).

SDL is implemented into curriculum frameworks by aligning learning outcomes with competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, self-regulation, and lifelong learning. Schools are allowed to redesign units of work to allow for greater student choice, encouraging learners to set personal goals, make decisions about how to approach tasks, and reflect on their progress (4).

A key strategy in implementation is the adoption of a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student, this encourages student independence over time. Early stages involve high levels of teacher support and as students gain confidence and competence, the teacher's role shifts from instructor to facilitator. This way students assume increasing ownership over their learning. This transition is carefully monitored to ensure students are equipped with the metacognitive tools and strategies necessary for success and if the teacher identifies gaps or notices that the students do not go on the right path, he must intervene (4).

Schools also create supportive environments that promote SDL through changes in classroom structures and routines. Timetables may be adjusted to allow for extended inquiry or interdisciplinary projects. Teachers may co-design learning pathways with students, allowing them to pursue topics of interest within a structured framework. Schools often develop resource banks, digital and physical, so that students can access materials independently.

Finally, successful implementation requires ongoing monitoring and reflection at both classroom and school levels. Schools may use student surveys, teacher feedback,

and performance data to evaluate the effectiveness of SDL initiatives and make evidence-based adjustments.

THE STRUCTURE OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The structure and design of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) activities are intentionally crafted to promote autonomy, critical thinking, and student ownership of the learning process. These activities are typically organized around inquiry-based learning models, with one of the most widely used frameworks being the 5Es model—Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate. Each phase is designed to scaffold learners as they move from guided discovery toward deeper, independent inquiry (4) (6).

In the *Engage* phase, students are introduced to thought-provoking stimuli such as questions, challenges, or real-world problems. These are meant to spark curiosity and activate prior knowledge. Teachers use this stage to set the stage for authentic inquiry by tapping into students' interests and encouraging them to connect personally with the topic (7).

The second phase, *Explore*, allows students to investigate the topic further through hands-on activities, research, experimentation, or collaborative inquiry. During this phase, students begin to generate their own research questions, seek out diverse resources such as books, websites, interviews, or digital databases, and gather information that will support deeper understanding. Teachers serve as facilitators, offering support as needed while maintaining an emphasis on student agency (7).

As students transition into the *Explain* phase, they begin synthesizing their findings and articulating their developing understanding. They may use journals, discussions, concept maps, or multimedia to demonstrate their learning. This stage often involves group work and teacher dialogue, helping students refine their thinking and strengthen communication skills (7).

The *Elaborate* phase encourages students to apply their learning in new contexts or extend their inquiry into more complex issues. At this point, they may design experiments, conduct interviews, or create real-world solutions to problems. Activities during this stage promote the so called higher-order thinking (critical thinking) allowing learners to draw connections, transfer knowledge, and deepen conceptual understanding (7).

Finally, the *Evaluate* phase emphasizes both formative and summative assessment. Students are guided to reflect on their learning process, assess their outcomes against pre-established goals or rubrics, and consider areas for growth. This reflective practice helps develop their metacognitive skills, which are essential to long-term self-direction (7).

Throughout the SDL process, students are given the flexibility to create personalized learning plans, including the development of timelines, checklists, and milestones to track their progress. This autonomy in pacing encourages students to manage their time, make decisions, and assume responsibility for meeting their learning objectives.

SDL activities culminate in diverse learning products, which may include portfolios, presentations, or written reports. Importantly, students are often given choice in how they present their work, allowing them to demonstrate understanding in ways that align with their interests.

To support this structure, teachers design activities that incorporate differentiated pathways**,** clear learning intentions, and embedded opportunities for feedback. The balance between structured guidance and open-ended exploration is carefully maintained to ensure that all students, regardless of their level, can engage meaningfully in SDL (8).

TEACHER ROLE

In a Self-Directed Learning framework, the teacher's role shifts from that of a traditional instructor to that of a facilitator, coach, and co-learner. Rather than delivering knowledge in the classical top-down manner, teachers create the conditions in which students can engage meaningfully with their learning, gradually developing autonomy and ownership over the process (9).

Teachers provide scaffolded support, offering structured guidance early on and gradually releasing responsibility to students as they become more confident and competent in self-directed practices. This is often achieved through mini-lessons or activities targeted at skill development such as how to formulate effective questions, to organize research, to choose trustworthy sources, or reflect on learning strategies.

Another key element of the teacher's role is to foster an inquiry-oriented classroom culture. This is accomplished through strategic questioning techniques that prompt students to think critically, explore multiple perspectives, and deepen their understanding. Open-ended questions, dialogue, and prompts that challenge students to justify their reasoning all contribute to stimulate intellectual engagement (10).

More importantly, at the end of the activity, the teacher also serves as a feedback provider and reflective partner. Ongoing feedback helps students monitor their progress, set new goals, and revise their strategies. Feedback in SDL contexts extends beyond correctness; it focuses on process over product, encouraging learners to evaluate their approaches and make connections (11).

Assessment is also an integral part of the teacher's role in supporting SDL. Rather than relying on summative evaluations, teachers employ formative assessment strategies that are embedded within the learning process. These include self- and peer-assessments, or observation. Such practices provide insight into students' thinking and development, allowing for real-time instructional adjustments.

Teachers also design and co-construct rubrics or success criteria with students, helping them internalize standards for quality work and self-evaluation (12). These tools support transparency and enable students to take an active role in assessing their performance and setting future learning goals.

In terms of summative assessment, teachers evaluate not only the final product but also the learning process, including students' planning, resource selection, collaboration,

and conclusion. Portfolios, digital presentations, and project exhibitions are commonly used to capture the depth of student learning in SDL environments.

Overall, the teacher's dual role as both facilitator and assessor ensures that students are supported throughout their learning journey while being held accountable for rigorous and meaningful outcomes (12). This balanced role is essential for nurturing independence while maintaining high expectations and academic integrity.

FROM CURIOSITY TO PRESENTATION: A SELF-DIRECTED ENGLISH LESSON

To illustrate the practical application of the concepts discussed above, I have selected a 2nd-grade English lesson titled *"My Favourite Animal."* This lesson integrates all four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and is designed with the following key objectives:

1. English vocabulary related to animals and habitats.
2. Basic sentence construction and oral communication.
3. Listening comprehension through peer presentations.
4. Reading simple texts and extracting information.
5. Self-assessment and reflection on language learning progress.

The lesson is divided into 5 seps in accordance to the stages mentioned in the part regarding *The Structure of Self-directed Learning Activities.*

The first step, *engage,* consisted in the introduction of the topic" Animals Around Us" where the students discussed about their pets or animals that they are interested about. In this section the teacher wrote on the board a series of qualities or defects of each animal and helped the students to read and connect each characteristic to the mentioned animal.

From this point, the teacher asked the students to each pick an animal they would like to research. After this they were divided into groups. They were instructed to work on a poster. Each student had to write something about his favourite animal and draw a picture of it. Each student was given a work sheet and was informed that he/she will complete it with the teacher`s help.

The second step, *plan*, the students create a simple plan with the teacher`s support.

- Formulate basic questions about their animal (e.g., *What does it eat? Where does it live?*)
- Identify resources they will use (picture books, simple websites, videos, or your own knowledge)
- Decide how they will share what they learn (drawing and labelling a poster, creating a short oral presentation, or making a simple booklet)

During the third step*, explore*, the students gather information using the resources available. The teacher provides mini-lessons on relevant vocabulary (animal names, habitats, actions), simple sentence structures, and how to take notes using key words.

The teacher constantly monitors their work and asks them questions to stimulate them to talk in English and helps the students complete their worksheets.

The fourth step, *create and present*, the students create a poster that incorporates the image and some characteristics of each animal. Each of them is asked to talk about the animal they have chosen using simple English sentences. The presentations are shared with the class to build confidence in speaking and listening.

In the final step, *reflect and evaluate*, students complete a guided self-reflection with questions such as:

- What new words did I learn?
- What was easy or hard about using English to talk about my animal?
- How did I prepare for my presentation?

The teacher provides supportive feedback on language use and effort, focusing on communication and improvement. Peers offer positive comments to encourage confidence.

During the lesson there were some examples of sentence frames that were used in the student`s worksheets. They focused of giving the students the necessary language knowledge to assimilate the topic of the lesson. These are the sentences the the students had to complete:

Introducing the animal:

- My favorite animal is a _____.
- I want to learn about the _____.
- Describing where it lives:
- The _____ lives in the _____.
- It can be found in the _____.

Talking about what it eats**:**

- The _____ eats _____.
- It likes to eat _____.

Describing what it looks like:

- The _____ is _____ (big/small/furry).
- It has _____ (fur/feathers/scales).
- Talking about actions:
- The _____ can _____ (run/fly/swim).
- It likes to _____ (jump/climb/sleep).

Ending the presentation:

- I like the _____ because it is _____.

Conclusion

The evolution of education in the 21st century demands more than rote knowledge, it requires learners to become autonomous thinkers, capable of inquiry, reflection, and adaptation. Self-Directed Learning (SDL) provides a framework through which these competencies can be cultivated from an early age. As outlined in this article, SDL is not

limited to theoretical constructs; it is a dynamic and practical methodology that takes shape in the daily interactions between teachers and students.

The 2nd-grade English lesson, *"My Favourite Animal,"* offers a concrete illustration of how SDL principles, such as curiosity-driven exploration, scaffolded independence, collaborative learning, and metacognitive reflection, can be effectively embedded into a primary classroom. Through structured stages like planning, exploring, creating, and evaluating, young learners are guided to take ownership of their learning while developing essential language and communication skills.

This example demonstrates that even at an early educational stage, students are capable of engaging in meaningful self-directed activities when provided with the right support and environment. The teacher's role as facilitator, mentor, and reflective partner proves critical in creating a safe yet stimulating space for this growth.

Ultimately, SDL is more than a pedagogical strategy—it is a mindset that empowers learners to be active participants in their own development. By fostering SDL from the foundational years of schooling, educators can lay the groundwork for a generation of resilient, curious, and lifelong learners. The challenge now is to ensure that such practices become the rule rather than the exception in educational systems worldwide.

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