

BOOK REVIEW

Fear is the Mind Killer

Dr James Mannion & Kate McAllister

Woodbridge, John Catt Educational Ltd, 2020

Reviewed by Brian Marsh

If Mannion and McAllister had simply written about the implementation of a Learning to Learn project in their school, it would be worth reading. Narrative accounts of work and initiatives undertaken in schools resonate with teachers. However, this book does so much more and:

1. addresses the rationale for leading a novel Learning Skills programme at their secondary school in the south of England
2. considers the contentious nature of Learning to Learn
3. presents the findings in terms of impact on both pupils and teachers
4. offers suggestions for other schools who may wish to engage with Learning to Learn

At the heart of the book is the key idea of overcoming that debilitating fear of failure that prevents pupils from working effectively and the burning question, “is it possible to teach children in such a way that they become more courageous, fearless learners? (p22)”. The authors’ approach is a novel Learning Skills programme which they devised and implemented with the generous support of their headteacher.

This programme aligns with Claxton’s description of a 4th Generation Learning to Learn implementation (Claxton, 2004) where the focus is metacognition, self-regulation and oracy. Their theory of action is clearly delineated. Facilitating the interaction between metacognition, self-regulation and oracy results in more effective self-regulated learners. It was achieved through a whole-school approach involving a dedicated taught course, an embedded approach of self-regulated learning across the curriculum and a set of whole-school practices to support the transfer of learning skills across the curriculum. They frame their programme as a ‘complex intervention’ made up of a range of research-informed practices with the hope that the marginal gains associated with each component would produce a large effect size. Chapter 5 provides a ‘warts-and-all’ description of how this was implemented.

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The evidence of impact of this Learning Skills programme is well documented. The findings described in chapter 6 are persuasive (further details of how the statistical analysis was undertaken can be found in Mannion & Mercer, 2016). A mixed methods approach was used, and the characteristics shown in identifying evidence from this programme, particularly in the range of data collection methods employed, suggest that pragmatism was the research paradigm adopted. The authors are realistic in the claims they make for impact but nevertheless, in my view, rightly claim that this programme has had real benefit on pupil learning and achievement.

While chapter 5 provides a detailed narrative account of how the programme was implemented at the authors' school chapter 8 provides a list of features that authors indicate are necessary for successful implementation of a Learning Skills programme but are broad enough to be tailored to an individual school's context. The two chapters together provide a framework for schools who wish to take this further.

A major feature of the book is the consideration of the contentious nature of Learning to Learn programmes as many previous iterations of Learning to Learn have failed to produce any gains. This is elegantly framed as a trial and recognises the tensions between those who identify as traditionalists and those who identify as progressives in education. I felt, however, this chapter required further detail:

1. The criticisms of Learning to Learn by Bennett and Christodoulou (Bennett, 2013; Christodoulou, 2013) were of the 3rd Generation of Learning to Learn (Claxton, 2004) – this programme was different and this could have been more explicitly stated in this chapter
2. Within the Education Endowment Foundation report on metacognition and self-regulated learning (EEF, 2018) are statements such as metacognition is a general skill that cannot be separated from subject knowledge and it is a misconception that metacognitive knowledge and strategies can be taught in discrete thinking skills lessons. As this has been promoted through the network of Research Schools, a more critical argument would have been helpful
3. Throughout the book is a running theme that the authors' implementation of a 4th Generation Learning to Learn programme is consistent with the current thinking regarding powerful knowledge and cognitive science approaches to teaching and learning. To have had this explicitly discussed in this chapter would, to me, have provided greater clarity.

The book, in essence, describes an in-depth pilot study. The questions that remain, however, are:

1. can such a programme be replicated in other schools?
2. can such a programme produce a similar impact on pupil learning?

The authors recognise that further evaluative work is needed, and the book only describes the story so far. The grounds for hope of future success are:

1. this is a 4th generation programme with an emphasis on metacognition, self-regulation and oracy
2. the narrative component of the book offers a practical framework of what might be done

While there will be some who will not be persuaded and still see Learning to Learn programmes either through a lens of 3rd generation activities or those who are will not consider issues beyond EEF guidance, those who do consider Mannion and McAllister's work seriously will have much to think about in supporting pupil learning.

REFERENCES

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