

Exploring the effects of starter tasks on readiness for learning.

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Rationale

Working as a teacher in my probationary year, I have been placed in a group of probationer teacher researchers to complete a piece of research within our classrooms. We discussed areas of our work that we were interested in developing our knowledge of. Starter tasks were suggested as a discussion topic and each member of the group had different experiences; some using tasks as a behaviour management technique, others for assessment purposes.

Our group then decided to examine the possible effects of starter tasks on the class' readiness for learning.

When discussing Start and Plenary tasks, The Department for Education (DfE, 2004) states that: 'Fundamental to managing pupil behaviour during starters and plenaries are rigorous planning and the appropriate use of a range of interactive teaching strategies'. Mortimore also highlights the need for 'structured sessions' (1988) in order to contribute to effective outcomes.

The common aims were to help pupils to 'develop their skills further' (DfE, 2004). They go on to explain that 'Starters exploit the prime learning time at the beginning of lessons when pupils are often at their most receptive and concentration levels are high'.

Starter tasks are able to:

- 'hook the learner' into a lesson by developing the relationship between initial activity and learning intention (Phillips, 2001)
- improve learner's ability in 'connecting the learning' (Smith, 1998)
- be used as 'management techniques' for disruption levels (DfE, 2004).

Aim

The aim was to evaluate the efficacy of starter tasks to prepare for learning and to evaluate the implications on our future practice.

Methodology

The curriculum area of numeracy was agreed, meaning these lessons were used for the enquiry. Each teacher was to use a timed starter task of ten questions during numeracy lessons for four weeks.

I used the online source 'Daily 10' (Topmarks, 2020) to give the learners a random selection of multiplication questions each day. The activity is designed as 'ideal for starter and plenary sessions' (Topmarks, 2020). In order to include some challenge (DfE, 2004 and Mortimore, 1988) I chose the option which included the eight times tables. The jotters were swapped with a partner then marked as the answers were revealed and discussed as a class.

Focusing on a group of six pupils meant that data collection and subsequent analysis was more manageable. Data collected included:

- observations
- jotter work
- questionnaires and
- informal discussions.

Observations of the group were made throughout the four week research period with notes taken on how engaged the group were during the starter task and how engaged they were throughout the rest of the lesson. The jotter work was analysed from how much work was completed to the accuracy of the work. Questionnaires were given to the children in order to give the students a voice in the research and find out how they felt the starter tasks effected their readiness to learn. Informal discussions were had with learners to gauge their feelings of readiness due to participating in the starter tasks.

In order to autonomies the learners in the focus group, the following names will be used:

Child A- A learner who finds the concept of multiplication challenging.

Child B- A learner who finds it challenging to focus during transitions despite being capable in maths.

Child C- Similar to Child B, a capable learner who frequently gets distracted or loses momentum.

Child D- A learner with a clear understanding of multiplication but finds transitions a challenge.

Child E- A learner who is frequently absent and has low self-esteem. They have a small amount of multiplication knowledge.

Child F- A learner who finds transitions very challenging and low self-esteem in Numeracy generally.

Findings

Observations

Through observations, it was noted that behaviours outside would impact on the participation in the starter task of individuals as the class struggled with the transition.

Self-esteem was also a challenge. Child E did not complete the challenge on many days until half way through when they saw the multiplications by ten. Their jotter would frequently be closed and at times thrown.

Child F would shout answers out every day and get frustrated if they had to swap jotters with blank spaces when time had run out.

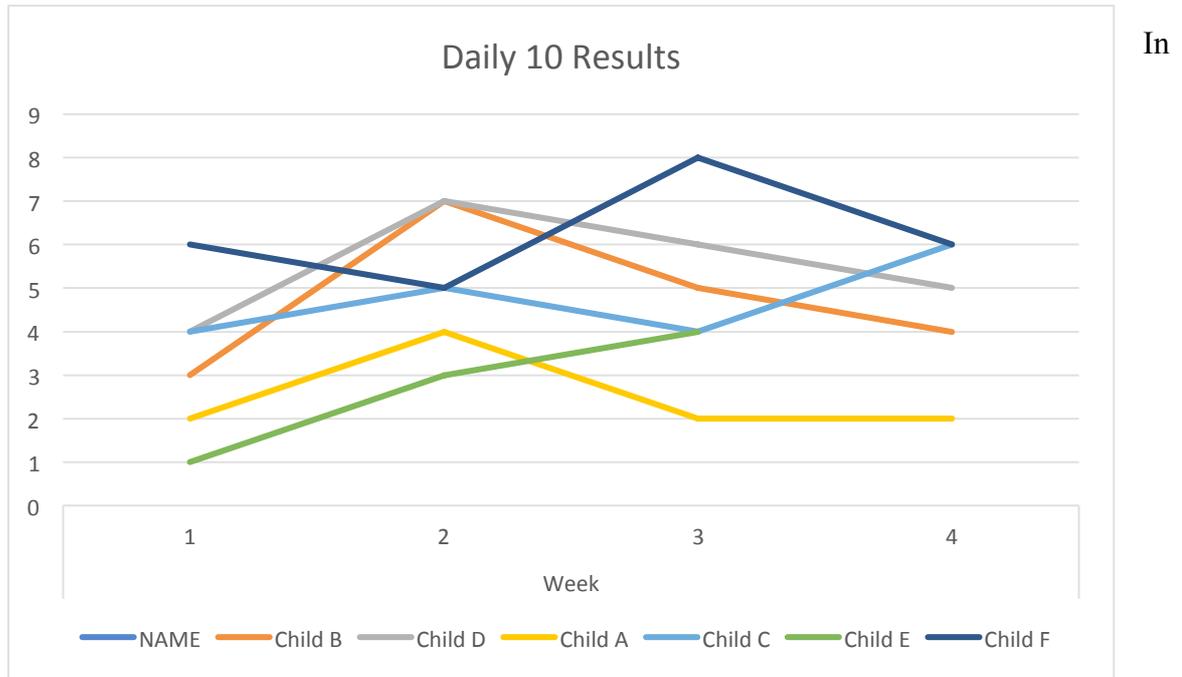
Child B, Child C and Child D were observed using their strategies such as counting on fingers to complete their task. It was noted that Child D's engagement reduced in the latter two weeks. Both Child D and Child C would discuss answers with others and had to be reminded to work independently. Child C would showed a competitive interest in week three when doing this.

After the task, a transition was required in the lesson, which at times caused disruption. On days that individuals received a higher score, their self-esteem was higher and they were focused to start their next task. On days when there was an issue with confidence (whether

due to outside behavioural issues, results or missing answers) the focus group were more distracted and this would continue throughout the lesson.

Jotter Work

The weekly mean was calculated in order to analyse the result with work completed throughout the rest of the Numeracy lesson.



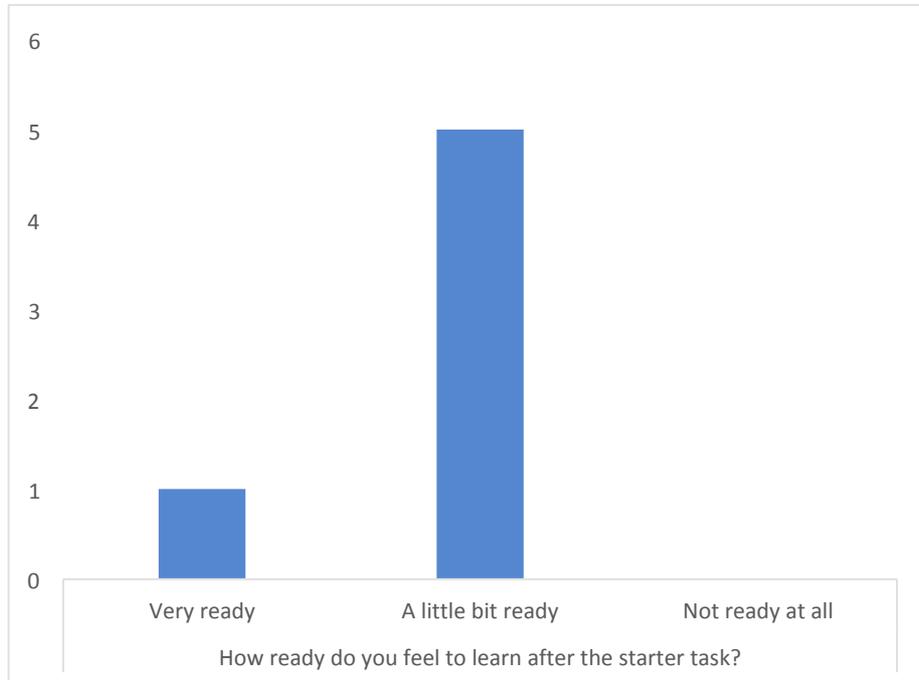
the children’s jotter work, it was noted that Child E made a gradual improvement. As the starter task became routine, they were more likely to participate with the rest of the class. They were absent during week four so no data could be collated.

All others in the focus group appeared to vary weekly in their results. It would appear that although Child A seemed engaged during the starter task, little was successfully completed.

On days when Child B was focused, their results were over fifty percent. Child C’s competitiveness can also be seen to impact on their results between weeks three and four.

Observations of Child D’s reduced engagement can also be seen in both their starter task and written work during the lesson. Despite Child F never appearing to settle in the observation notes, they did complete the task and showed a sound understanding of the multiplication.

Questionnaires How ready do you feel to start after starter task?



From the questionnaires it became apparent that a majority of the group only felt ‘a little bit ready’ to complete their numeracy tasks and participate in the lesson.

Informal Discussions

Informal discussions with the learners showed their frustrations when the questions including multiplications of eight were presented. If they missed any questions the class would ask for extra time or not swap jotters with their partners.

By week four, the countdown before the first question seemed to settle the class as they appeared to make the connection between the ‘beep’ and their focusing.

Conclusion

This enquiry exploring the effects of starter tasks on readiness for learning has shown that in this classroom, the starter task supported the readiness for learning of learners before numeracy lessons. The starter tasks created routine and settled the class into the numeracy topic, increasing their readiness for learning in the subsequent lesson.

As learner’s confidence improved, they became more engaged in the starter task activity. Successful completion of the starter task meant that they had improved participation in the subsequent lesson. This was partly due to the emotional state of the learners as they had increased self-esteem. The children showed this through completing the questionnaires, having the confidence to reflect on their own learning, as this can be a difficult concept for young learners.

By the third week, the class had settled into the new routine and this could also be seen through their ability to prepare their jotters and begin the task with minimal teacher input required in comparison to weeks one and two. This made a large impact on the focus group's readiness to learn in the remaining time of the lesson.

Receiving feedback also made an impact on the learners, especially those who thrived in a competitive nature- each day they had a goal to achieve. This also then impacted on their self-esteem and readiness to learn.

Self-esteem of individuals has been highlighted throughout this research process and integral to the learners in my classroom. From their ability to transition into activities, completion of the task and requiring resilience to move on.

Implications for Future Practice

Whole class involvement mentioned by the DfE (2004) discussing the 'risk of its (starter tasks) leading to misbehaviour' was a main concern for the me at the start of the research. However, creating routine (Mortimore, 1988 and Muijs and Reynolds, 2001) benefitted the learning completed and eased transitions.

Scottish Government policy 'Building the Curriculum 3' highlights the planning process in connecting teaching, learning and assessment to ensure a successful curriculum delivery:

'To support curriculum planning and to ensure that all learners have access to an active, enterprising learning environment, a coherent approach to planning learning, teaching and assessment and to sharing information about progress and achievements is needed' (2008).

Implications for my future practice will hence be to ensure engaging and interconnected lessons are planned to ease and support learning experiences of my learners. I can do this by completing reading of a range of planners, engaging in critical dialogue with colleagues and introducing new activities to groups of learners.

Developing my knowledge and understanding of children's self-esteem will also be a focal point of my future practice. This affects all learners, particularly in my current classroom. Having confidence to face a challenge, even in a multiplication question, proved a difficult concept for some.

Dylan William explains developing practice: 'Changing practice requires new kinds of teacher learning and new kinds of teacher professional development' (2010, 5:07). I will seek creative ways to develop my future practice, including training opportunities and seeking advice from various sources.

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