



INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT LEARNING SKILLS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: This paper explores international experiences in developing independent learning skills among primary school students, with a focus on practices in Finland, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. Drawing from contemporary educational theory and cross-national case studies, the analysis highlights how pedagogical approaches, cultural expectations, and systemic structures shape learners' capacity for autonomy and self-regulation.

Key words: Independent learning, self-regulated learning, primary education, international education, learner autonomy, educational systems, pedagogy, digital learning

Introduction

Independent learning in primary education refers to a learner's ability to take initiative, set goals, select strategies, monitor progress, and reflect on outcomes with minimal reliance on external guidance. This capacity not only enhances academic achievement but also underpins the development of critical thinking, metacognition, and self-regulation—skills deemed essential in contemporary knowledge economies. Importantly, numerous international studies underscore that these competencies, when nurtured from an early age, lay a strong foundation for autonomous learning in later stages of education and beyond.

Globally, countries have adopted varied approaches to integrating independent learning frameworks within primary curricula. While Scandinavian nations emphasize learner autonomy and inquiry-based learning from the earliest years, East Asian systems often combine high academic expectations with structured scaffolding to support self-regulated learning behaviors. Similarly, Anglo-American models tend to balance direct instruction with opportunities for individualized learning through project-based or blended formats.

Literature Review

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Zimmerman's model of self-regulated learning provide a foundational framework for understanding how learners engage with, monitor, and direct their own learning processes. These theories emphasize the role of metacognitive awareness, motivation, and behavioral regulation—skills that can be cultivated from early childhood. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further supports the development of autonomy through scaffolding and social interaction, suggesting that independent learning emerges from guided participation and gradually increasing responsibility.

Recent studies identify several core elements essential for independent learning in primary education:

- **Goal setting and planning**
- **Metacognitive strategies** such as self-monitoring and reflection
- **Motivational self-beliefs**

- **Use of learning resources**, including digital tools
- **Supportive learning environments** that promote autonomy

These components are shown to be teachable through explicit instruction, modeling, and embedded classroom routines. Furthermore, teacher expectations, feedback style, and classroom climate significantly influence the degree to which learners internalize these practices.

International Trends and Comparative Insights

Empirical research suggests that countries differ widely in how independent learning is approached within primary education. In Finland, for example, autonomy-supportive teaching and student agency are embedded into national curricula, emphasizing trust in learners and minimal standardized testing. In contrast, Singapore integrates structured training in metacognitive strategies within a highly systematic and rigorous framework. Meanwhile, the UK promotes independent learning through inquiry-based and project-based pedagogies, supported by assessment for learning (AfL) practices.

Digital platforms have also played a transformative role globally. Programs like Australia's "Learning by Design" and South Korea's smart learning initiatives integrate ICT tools to foster self-paced and interest-driven learning at the primary level. These approaches recognize the role of digital fluency in shaping new forms of learner autonomy and engagement.

Analysis and results

Developing independent learning skills in primary education varies widely across national contexts, shaped by pedagogical philosophies, curriculum frameworks, teacher training models, and socio-cultural attitudes toward autonomy and responsibility. This section provides a comparative overview of approaches in four countries often cited for their innovation or success in fostering learner autonomy: **Finland, Singapore, United Kingdom, and South Korea.**

1. Finland: Trust and Autonomy from the Start

Finland's education system is globally recognized for its child-centered, autonomy-supportive approach. Independent learning is not taught as a separate skill but is embedded throughout the curriculum and classroom culture. Teachers are trained to provide minimal but strategic scaffolding, enabling learners to engage in inquiry, set learning goals, and reflect on outcomes from an early age.

Key features include:

- Integrated play-based learning in early years transitioning into project-based inquiry.
- Minimal use of standardized testing; focus is on formative feedback and self-assessment.
- Strong teacher autonomy, enabling flexible responses to individual learner needs.

Finnish students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning through open-ended tasks and peer collaboration, creating a natural foundation for self-regulated learning.

2. Singapore: Structured Independence and Metacognitive Training

Singapore's approach combines high academic expectations with explicit training in metacognitive strategies. The curriculum incorporates "Thinking Routines" and "Self-directed Learning Time" as formal components from primary levels onward.

Distinctive aspects:

- Direct instruction in goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflective learning.
- Use of structured worksheets and ICT tools to support independent work.
- A national “21st Century Competencies” framework that embeds SDL across

subjects.

While the approach is more structured than in Finland, Singaporean students demonstrate high self-discipline and resilience, attributes closely linked to successful independent learning.

3. United Kingdom: Inquiry and Assessment for Learning (Afl)

The UK fosters independent learning through constructivist approaches such as inquiry-based learning, project work, and the widespread use of formative assessment tools. Teachers guide students to reflect on their progress and set personalized learning goals.

Key practices:

- Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) embedded in the national curriculum.
- Use of “Learning Journals,” peer feedback, and self-evaluation rubrics in classrooms.
- Emphasis on pupil voice and choice in task selection.

Despite positive outcomes, implementation varies by school, and there are concerns that increased standardization pressures may reduce teacher capacity to promote deep autonomy.

4. South Korea: Digital Tools for Scaffolded Independence

South Korea represents a unique blend of structured instruction and cutting-edge digital integration. Government-led “Smart Education” initiatives have introduced e-learning platforms that support self-paced, individualized learning experiences from primary levels.

Characteristics:

- Use of digital textbooks and AI-based learning paths tailored to student ability.
- Parental involvement through online learning dashboards.
- Government investment in teacher training for blended learning delivery.

While the system remains exam-oriented, the inclusion of ICT-enabled scaffolding has expanded opportunities for learners to develop independent study habits outside the classroom.

Conclusion

The comparative exploration of international approaches to developing independent learning skills in primary education reveals a spectrum of pedagogical models, each grounded in distinct cultural, curricular, and institutional contexts. Despite their differences, successful systems share a common understanding: independent learning is not an innate trait but a cultivated competency that requires deliberate scaffolding, consistent practice, and supportive environments from the early years of formal education.

Countries such as **Finland** demonstrate that a trust-based, autonomy-driven model can yield learners who are intrinsically motivated and capable of managing their own learning processes. Conversely, **Singapore** and **South Korea** illustrate how structured approaches—anchored in explicit instruction and digital innovation—can effectively nurture self-regulation even within highly standardized systems. The **United Kingdom** showcases the potential of inquiry-based learning and formative assessment to empower students with voice, choice, and responsibility in their learning journey.

These diverse experiences underscore that there is no universal blueprint for fostering independent learning. However, certain enabling conditions consistently emerge across high-performing systems:

- Well-prepared teachers who understand and model metacognitive strategies.
- Curricula that allow space for goal-setting, reflection, and student agency.
- A balanced integration of technology that supports, rather than replaces, human guidance.

An educational culture that views autonomy as a developmental goal, not merely a by-product of achievement

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