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Empowering Voices of Students with Learning Difficulties – Implementing Self-Regulated Learning Strategies in a Special School through Participatory Action Research

Winnie Sin Wai Pui¹

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how self-regulated learning strategies can provide opportunities for students with learning difficulties to express their ideas and reflect on their learning progress. A qualitative, multiple-method research design was used for this participatory action research in a special school in Hong Kong. Data were collected for an academic year in a Form 5 (Year 12 in the UK) class setting. The ‘C. Ind. Le Coding Scheme’ from Whitebread et al. (2009) was used in the data analysis, providing an indicator of verbal and non-verbal self-regulation. My study indicates that the teachers’ guidance and feedback could foster the students’ expressive capability. The students actively shared their ideas, and appreciated everyone’s uniqueness in their school learning. This paper offers examples of how to implement self-regulated learning strategies at subject teaching (teacher-level) and learning (student-level), this promotes and supports the voices of students with learning difficulties in a special educational context.

KEY WORDS:

students with learning difficulties; student voice; self-regulated learning strategies; special educational curriculum design; Hong Kong

Background and Rationale

In a democracy, everyone’s ‘voices’, opinions and reflections should be equally respected. This includes the place that student voice has in school planning and

¹ Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; Centre for Macau Studies, University of Macau.

E-MAIL: swwp2@cam.ac.uk; winnieswp@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-2419-1759

development. Therefore, staff and teachers in schools should be conscious that every child has inherent rights. Practitioners have a responsibility to operate inclusively, and without discrimination. In Hong Kong, increasing public funding may partly help students with learning difficulties and disabilities by giving them more study opportunities; but the core problem is that students still suffer from discrimination from society's preconceptions. The negative consequences of this discrimination include low status, low employment rates and even reduced higher education opportunities. In this article, therefore, I compel us to consider how policy-making and resources may affect our vision: to sustain a high-quality teaching system, to recognise the unique talents and capabilities of students with learning difficulties and to break stereotypical public attitudes towards disabled people.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12, 23 and 29 (UN, 1990), enshrines these commitments. This is also in accordance with Lewis and Porter's (2007) assertion that this "voice" can provide opportunities for students to make active decisions and to empower them in society and in their future lives. Cognisant here of the limited amount of discrete, research involving learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, my focus in this article is to consider the importance of valuing student 'voice', recognising that, through self-regulated learning strategies, they have the capacity to give expression to their ideas.

The common perception of students with learning difficulties is of 'low-level', 'inarticulate learners'. Mills and Keil (2005) are concerned that these students are too easily influenced by others when making their own decisions. Middleton (1999) raises the issue of an assumed lack of credibility and trustworthiness in their 'voices', reawakening the existence of prejudice and discrimination. Middleton points out that people doubt whether these students' voices could be a valuable and legitimate area of research. Though many educators are striving to redress these issues, it is a long-standing problem. If we apply a positivist perspective to understanding this particular circumstance, i.e. 'voice', it means that there is only 'one' real truth and that the contextual and performative nature of the 'voice' is denied (Ashby, 2011; Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012). The concept here is not to ensure that the 'one' real truth be disclosed, but rather to let the participants' intended meaning come to light in a valid manner, as accurately as possible (Ashby, 2011). According to Christine Gilbert (TSO, 2006), one of Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors,

Empowerment is not just about academic success; it also means having your views listened to, respected and acted upon ... it is right that they are engaged in their own learning and development in this way.

The importance of involving students' voice in our educational system is clear, although we might face different kinds of challenges. Therefore, whether in mainstream or

special educational settings, it is worth investigating how we can empower students' voices in order to create an interactive and engaging learning environment.

Self-regulated learning strategies emphasise developing students' own learning strategies. They can be effectively personalized to empower students to overcome their struggles and to respond to their different needs to learn (Pui, 2016; Pui, 2012; Tyler & Lisa, 2011; Biggs & Moore, 1993; Palincsar, 1986). So far, however, there has been little discussion about the implementation of self-regulated learning strategies in special educational settings. Therefore, considering that introducing self-regulated learning strategies encourages learners to grow in confidence (Ponnusamy, 2006) through the learning process of self-regulation, and creates a positive learning atmosphere whilst valuing everyone's strengths and weaknesses, the main issues addressed in this paper are:

- a) An examination of how self-regulated learning strategies impact on empowering students through expressing their voices and engaging in learning on a practical level;
- b) An exploration of the impact on teaching and learning of encouraging students' voices via the implementation of self-regulated learning strategies in a special educational context.

This paper begins with background information about Hong Kong's special educational system, and key definitions. It then moves on to methodology, showing how a qualitative research design – participatory action research – was conducted in a special needs school class. Evidence from the study shows how self-regulated learning strategies have an impact on the learning of students with learning difficulties and disabilities, providing opportunities for students to express their ideas and reflect on their learning progress in school. This is followed by a discussion of the implications for future study.

Students with learning difficulties in Hong Kong

This section begins by explaining the conceptual ideas of disabilities and learning difficulties in Hong Kong – the context of my study. I then introduce the special education context in this Chinese city. Learning difficulties, sometimes interchangeably called learning disabilities in the United Kingdom, are often vaguely defined in Hong Kong, whilst 'intellectual disability' is a separate term used in some contexts in Hong Kong to describe students who are regarded as having different "IQ levels".

A student with learning difficulties in Hong Kong is only identified when they have trouble performing specific types of learning skills or tasks in schools. Hong Kong

students with mild disabilities (i.e. intellectual disability) are often advised to study in mainstream schools, with differing levels of support. The aim of this supportive system is to assist students with learning difficulties to adjust to teaching and learning styles in a mainstream classroom. Figure 1 shows the 3-Tier Model (EDB, 2010). This model gives a clear idea of what teachers do when students are classified at different levels of learning difficulties. Those who have been “diagnosed” with severe or profound disabilities will attend schools which are under the structure of the special education system (EDB, 2010).

In the case in this study, the setting of this special school is similar to other mainstream schools in Hong Kong. They have Chinese, English, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, etc. as core subjects. The students in this school have various physical special needs and some of them have mild mental disabilities.

Figure 1. 3-Tier support model (EDB, 2010)

Giving a ‘voice’ to students

Giving a voice to students strengthens the focus on engaging with everyone (students with or without learning difficulties) in a class. It is understandable that teachers may feel threatened and their authority undermined by student voice (Lewis & Burman, 2008; Macbeath, 2006; Sellman, 2003; Tyrrell, 2002); however, rather than view this as a challenge to their authority (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006; Hamill & Boyd, 2002), an open approach to teacher reforms and classroom management would be beneficial to the learning process: everyone’s voice has its own meaning and value. Recent evidence (Middleton, 1999; Biklen, 2000) suggests that including the students’ voice discloses a fuller perspective of students’ thoughts and values; even if they are not ideally

expressed or communicated, this formally recognises their views within the learning journey. Middleton (1999) acknowledges the challenge for a non-disabled person to understand life as a student with disabilities. Biklen (2000) concludes that while those with disabilities have accepted differences, these same differences should not lessen the 'right' to equal treatment.

Byrnes and Rickards (2011) conclude that student voice can be part of the evaluation system, supported by Middleton (1999), forewarning of dependency or 'learned helplessness'. Student voice can be a tool for developing teachers' self-reflection, while ensuring the input of all 'voices' into the school system. To conclude, there is not one definition of student voice and, once these voices have been captured, they will impact on both individual learning and the best practice of entire schools.

Self-regulated learning strategies

As discussed, though we might face different struggles and challenges when we introduce a system of celebrating student voice in classrooms, it is clear that student voice has an important role both in learning and teaching. We cannot say that we want our students to develop higher executive capability – e.g. skills of expressing their ideas – and yet never give them an opportunity to practice (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Therefore, I introduced self-regulated learning strategies and explored how they impact on assisting in the learning process of students with learning difficulties in my study. The evidence in this paper only focuses on the aspect of how self-regulated learning strategies impact on encouraging student voice in a special educational context.

The self-regulation model of Whitebread et al. (2009) includes three key elements: (1) Metacognitive knowledge; (2) Metacognitive regulation and (3) Emotional/motivational regulation. Metacognitive knowledge concerns how self-knowledge affects their cognitive performance. Metacognitive regulation refers to how people are aware of tasks and use strategies to plan, monitor, control and evaluate in order to modify their behaviours. Finally, in Whitebread et al. (2009)'s model, they also emphasise the importance of emotional and motivational regulation. Whitebread et al. (2009) believe that affective factors might also influence students' learning performance and attitudes (Boekaerts, 2006).

In my own previous studies (Pui, 2016; Pui, 2012), the data promisingly demonstrated that students were capable of working out complex tasks and developing higher-order thinking skills towards the application of self-regulated learning strategies, for instance, self-reflection (one of the stages of metacognitive regulation). Other related studies (O' Regan et al., 2010; Ponnusamy 2006) also support the results of the studies above. The Kentucky Youth Advocacy Project (KYAP) is a scheme which aims to

investigate how to help students with disabilities to improve their self-advocacy and self-determination by teaching them self-regulated learning strategies (O' Regan et al., 2010). This study shows that students' negative feelings decrease as self-knowledge increases, and as they learn how "to choose to achieve their goals" in their learning environments. Other studies under the umbrella of KYAP also show that after the teaching of self-determined learning, most students can voice their preferences, find out task goals and express themselves better. The more teachers and educators can give students spaces and opportunities to explore, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

In essence, learning is not just a response to teachers or environments; it involves self-regulation and building up the conceptual idea of what we have learned through self-reflection (Von Glasersfeld, 1995). Self-regulation has an emphasis on generating and sustaining engagement in learning. Students have to recognise their own learning needs and become active participants.

Methodology

My study was based on a qualitative pragmatic research design (Oquist, 1978) with a participatory action research methodology (Bassey, 1999; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Elliott 1991; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). It consisted of a three-phase process of data collection in Hong Kong. The data collection process took over a year; in other words, it involved students studying over three academic terms. Each phase lasted around two to three months, fitting in with the school's academic calendar.

I used classroom observation, observation notes, teachers' diaries, students' self-evaluation reports, student interviews and review documents as the research tools in my study. My study happened in a form 5 class setting in a special school. This is a Chinese subject teaching classroom. The subject teacher and all the students in the class were involved in my study. Miss Matilda is their subject teacher. The students' backgrounds are: 1) Ben – with mild intellectual disability; 2) Hugo – with epilepsy, severe in primary school, now controlled; 3) Nancy – with mild cerebral palsy; 4) Jason – with mild cerebral palsy and hearing impairment; 5) William – with cerebral palsy.

At the outset preparations such as: a site visit, contacting principals and staff in schools, collecting related documents (e.g. students' background information, curriculum and planning) were undertaken before the participatory action research began. I also conducted classroom visits and observations aimed at building rapport and mutual communication with teachers before the study commenced.

At the next stage interviews with each student were conducted after each term (i.e. three terms in total). Teachers started to prepare personal diaries once the

self-regulated learning strategies were being introduced in class. The collection of related documents, such as, video recordings, observation notes, students' self-evaluation records, students' subject records and meeting records with teachers began once the study was under way.

I applied the three-step process of Miles and Huberman (1994). This three-step framework enabled me to create a valid set of results. This first step, 'data reduction', involved a process of reducing and organising the data, for example, writing summaries, discarding irrelevant data and so on. For the 'irrelevant' data that I discarded, the second phrase involved 'data display'. During this stage I drew conclusions from a large data set, in the form of tables, charts, and diagrams which helped to display the data effectively. This was a continual process, rather than just one carried out at the end of the data collection (Creswell, 2008). The concluding stage was 'conclusion drawing/verification', in which all these chunks of data allowed me to begin to develop the discussion and conclusion of my study. The initial conclusions were verified through other data references. After the large data set was categorised into chunks, categorical coding was applied to make sense of the relevant data with the "C. Ind. Coding Scheme: verbal and Nonverbal Indicators of Metacognition and Self-regulation" (Whitebread et al., 2009) (Table 1).

Table 1. C. Ind. Coding Scheme Whitebread et al. (2009)

Metacognitive Knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Knowledge of persons · Knowledge of tasks · Knowledge of strategies
Metacognitive Regulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Planning · Monitoring · Control Evaluation
Emotional and Motivational Regulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Emotional/ motivational monitoring · Emotional/ motivational control

In relation to ethical issues, the teachers (participants) and students (respondents) remained anonymous and all of them were renamed.

In this article I focus on the teaching and learning within the subject of 'Chinese'. Further implications in terms of other subjects (i.e. Liberal Studies, English and Mathematics) however can be inferred. This analysis draws upon detailed examination of transcripts from lessons observed.

All students and teachers remained anonymous and have been given pseudonyms. In order to obtain access for data collection in schools, a formal consent letter was sent to all parties (principal and teachers from the school). The principal and the teachers were given a clear understanding of my research rationale, objectives, period of collection, research significance and some pre-preparation materials (e.g. interview scheme and teaching materials). Ensuring informed consent was an ongoing process; this provided an opportunity for participants to self-reflect and ensured that there was mutual communication among researchers and participants at different stages of the study (Knox et al., 2000; Altrichter et al., 2008; Robson, 2002; Silverman, 2000).

Finding and discussion

The following themes demonstrate how both the teacher and the students with learning difficulties benefited from gaining students' voices through the implementation of self-regulated learning strategies/activities, for instance, goal-setting, planning ahead, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. In the latter part, the findings show how the teachers were inspired in their pedagogy design by integrating self-regulated learning strategies in their teaching.

Supporting students in becoming more self-aware and discovering their own voices by using self-evaluation skills

Extract 1 is a conversation taken from a Chinese lesson. It exemplifies how each student responded to the teacher's question after an evaluation task was conducted. After the self-regulated learning strategies were introduced into the Chinese syllabus, Miss Matilda designed various evaluation tasks for the students, easy to begin with, and gradually becoming more complicated. The purpose of setting all these tasks was to help empower the students' own self-regulation capabilities. Extract 1 comes from the second term of the students' study.

Extract 1

Miss Matilda: What did you think about the standard of your last presentation?

Nancy: I felt very scared.

Miss Matilda: Are you confident of doing better in today's presentation?

Nancy: I hope I can do it.

Miss Matilda: Okay, so tell me how you can do it better today?

Nancy: I will try to share more of my ideas with my classmates.

Miss Matilda: How about contributions to the conclusion?

Nancy: Err... make a conclusion... err...

Miss Matilda: How was your performance when making a conclusion last time?
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Nancy: Umm... I did not clearly say my supporting information.

Miss Matilda: Do you think you could do it better this time?

Nancy: Yes, I will.

Miss Matilda: How about you, William?

William: Yes, I also did not speak clearly. When I felt nervous, I did not speak well. It seems like some words were eaten (i.e. 'missed') in a whole sentence.

Miss Matilda: Yes, I see. It seems like some words were 'eaten'! So, what could you do about this?

William: I will speak more slowly.

Miss Matilda: You did really well just now. Your speaking speed is really appropriate. Well done!

Miss Matilda: How about you, Ben? I remember that I reminded you to assist the other students in the 20 group. For instance, Nancy was adamant to repeat the same discussion question last time. If this situation happened again, what could you do?

Ben: I will ask her if she actually meant to do this.

Miss Matilda: Okay. What if s/he just keeps using the same words to ask the question? How could you respond to the discussion leader?

Ben: Umm... I think... I think I will say that we have discussed something related to this question: shall we invite another classmate to talk more?

...
...
...

(CR/2nd – 180214)

After the earlier discussion on "How to use their pocket money", the teacher tried reminding them of their goals and to concentrate on their improvement points. Firstly, let's look at Nancy's case. She claimed that she still felt scared during the discussion. However, it was clear that she had been positive, even with these confidence issues. At least she was willing to share her feelings with others. Although Nancy did not seem too confident, as she said, 'I *hope* I can do it (Line 4)', it is worth noting that she could tell the teacher what she aimed to improve and which strategies she was going to apply in the coming task. Nancy showed that she was more confident after the teacher went

over what they had previously done. She said, 'Yes, I will. (Line 12)'. A similar situation applied with William (Line 13 – Line 18) and Ben's cases (Line 19 – Line 26). It appears that the teacher was repeating the task, i.e. teaching the topic of discussion skills in the lesson. However, the teacher illustrated how she, too, can successfully respond to individual needs.

Continue from Extract 1

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Miss Matilda: Afterwards, we talked about how to improve our discussion with the evaluation. For instance, how to articulate the words clearly and how to assist classmates in keeping on the right track?

William: I could write them down.

Ben: I could use a pen to jot down the notes.

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Miss Matilda: Good, jot down the notes. Why do you think it helps?

William: I could write down what others have said. This could avoid repeating other classmates' points of view.

...

...

...

Miss Matilda: How could you make sure you apply the information; you have researched, for your presentation tomorrow?

Ben: Looking at it. Reading it more.

Miss Matilda: Okay, let me now read it a few more times. Do you think it is okay?

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William: I think we might highlight the key points.

Nancy: We could use a highlighter or use the bold option for sentences in the computer. We could create another Word document and copy and paste the key points there.

(CR/2nd – 180214)

After the teacher's review of the students learning from the previous self-evaluation task, the teacher extended the topic (Line 34 – Line 52). The teacher raised two hypothetical situations for the students to think about and find solutions. Those two situations were related to the challenges they faced all the time. Line 37 indicates that they were asking about how they could memorise others' ideas and Line 46 points to how to manage a large volume of data during a discussion. Ben, William and Nancy showed they were capable of addressing the teacher's questions appropriately, though some of them needed the prompts and hints. In Line 41, it is noticeable that William did not only suggest he could write down the notes (i.e. as a method/tool), he also explained the reason why jotting down notes had its advantages in a discussion.

In brief, this representative example promisingly proves that the students gradually discovered their educational needs, feeling confident in facing their weakness and

working out related strategies in order to monitor/prepare for new tasks with their own voices.

Jason, who is hearing impaired, usually performed worse than the others in academic tasks. He always appeared shy and was not willing to patiently listen to others. Because of his hearing problem, it was understandable that he was not willing to share or to talk to others in the lessons. However, in Extract 2, we see that Jason was also successful in speaking about his target and, crucially, prepared to work harder after a goal-setting task with the teachers. More examples follow of Jason's learning behaviours.

Extract 2

Miss Matilda: Jason, have you remembered that we set a joint goal for Miss Cali and Mr. Wong? It is also a long-term goal for you. Do you still remember it?

Jason: To respond to teachers' questions.

Miss Matilda: Good! How about in a group discussion?

Jason: I have to face people to talk to them.

Miss Matilda: Very good, please remember it.

(CR/2nd – 180214)

Discovering their preferred way of learning: encouraging the students to actively share their ideas, learn from others and appreciate everyone's uniqueness with I.T. techniques

'Google Drive' is a tool that Miss Matilda used throughout the academic year. This is an effective platform to create 'openings' for students to learn from each other (e.g. Figure 2). For instance, the students were assigned homework – a mind map exercise as group work. This might involve looking at (as a guideline or monitoring tool), commenting on (offering opportunities for thought, self-reflection and peer review), and contributing to the work of others.

Moreover, since some of the students have challenges with writing due to their learning difficulties, typing is a useful tool to enhance the capability of the students' expression. Although I.T. resources and some strategies (e.g. self-regulated learning strategies) can provide a more effective way for students to learn, teachers sometimes have to consider how to balance the teaching content (i.e. knowledge Vs. generic skills), especially in the educational context in Asia where "curriculum chasing" is a key characteristic of the exam-based system.

Figure 2. Students Contributed their Ideas on a Group Task (TM/1st – 151113)

Although the teachers sometimes still face challenges, Miss Matilda confirmed the importance of helping students to transfer what they have learned into a real context.

You might think that teaching students how to use research skills should not be included in my subject teaching (i.e. Chinese). However, these skills that cross subject teaching could help students to learn things effectively; also, they know how to apply what they have learnt in a real situation. (TM/2nd – 190214)

It should be an ideal plan if several subjects collaborate and teach similar generic skills together. It could provide a platform for students to learn the skills gradually and intensively. Not as effective if there is only one subject to promote a skill at a given time. (TM/2nd – 190214)

Facilitating the students to find ways to enhance the capability of expressing their opinions through self-monitoring skills

The next example demonstrates how the teachers developed some tools and guidelines to assist the students in monitoring the tasks. Figure 3 is a “cue card” to remind students how to express their views in an appropriate way during discussions in

lessons. This cue card was designed by Miss Matilda, for the purpose of enhancing students' self-monitoring and expression capabilities.

我是主持/主席, 我的職責是.....

職責	用語提示
主持會議	各位同學, 今天我們討論的題目是: XXXX
邀請同學發言	XXX同學, 請問你有甚麼看法? XXX同學, 你認為這個想法可行嗎?
總結同學說話	剛才, XXX同學表達了.....
安排發言次序	我先請XXX同學先說話, 然後請XXX繼續
澄清組員的說話	你的意思是不是..... 你能否把意思說得清楚一點?

Figure 3. Students' cue card (in Chinese) (LM/2nd – 041213)

Table 2. Cue card (translation version) – Discussion guidelines for leader in a group discussion

Responsibilities	Sample instructions
Starting a discussion	Hellow, everybody, today we are going to discuss XXXX
To invite classmates to express their ideas and opinions	XXXX, do you have any ideas on this topic? XXXX, do you think your suggestions are practical and constructive? How could you make that work in practice?
To summerise classmates' expressions	In short, XXXX said that...
To organise classmates to speak in order	I invite XXXX to speak about his/her ideas first. Afterwards, XXXX you could continue to express you ideas.
To clarify classmates' view-points	Do you mean...? Could you clarify what you have said?

When the students are still learning to master a skill, for instance, to practise a proper discussion with their peers, this card could have the function of reminding and guiding students to achieve the task with the new skill. This cue card exemplifies how the

teacher embeds the design of self-regulated learning strategies in her subject teaching so as to offer different channels for student voices.

Putting self-regulated learning strategies into practice – new insights in self-regulated learning from teacher’s perspectives

Miss Matilda agreed to start to integrate self-regulated learning strategies in her pedagogical design and teaching. The results show that the teacher felt amazed at how self-regulated learning could empower students’ voices during the lessons, and at the extent to which the application of self-regulated learning strategies in lessons could help them to gain a better understanding of the students’ needs.

Miss Matilda introduced a task of diary writing. Every student in her Chinese class was required to write a piece in their diary every week. The students could either use paper and pen or type to express anything about their lives or studies throughout the past week. This set task illustrated how the students could practise the subject (i.e. writing skills) while simultaneously training to listen to their own voice.

The example below describes how Miss Matilda was taken aback and, quite frankly, amazed with the student’s ability to plan. It can be seen that she realised that she could also learn something from the diary writing of the students.

I know more about what they can do from reading their diaries. They write in the diary about how they have prepared for the trip. I have just found out that they knew that they had to bring a powerbank (i.e. back-up battery for a phone) and adaptor when they travelled to another place. I was so astonished because I did not think that they could be so thoughtful when preparing a task. (TM/1st – 251113)

Miss Matilda tried to tell them what they were going to learn in the first term. Presenting clear aims and objectives, per term, i.e. a standard, was one of the teaching methods that was newly-introduced in Chinese studies.

Before I start a new learning topic, I will use an outline to introduce what I am going to teach, or we can say that they are going to learn. Also, I will try to make the task aim clearly every time. (TM/1st – 131113)

Miss Matilda believed that this learning and teaching process might assist the students to learn how to set up their learning goals – with this basic instruction from the teacher, as they were still at an early stage of learning how to apply self-regulated learning strategies into their subject learning.

In the second term of learning, after our evaluation meeting and discussion, Miss Matilda improved the expression of the learning outline. Miss Matilda used ‘I’ at the beginning of each single learning aim in the course outline. For example, the learning aims of one chapter – ‘Suggesting my Opinions’ – are shown below:

Table 3. 'Suggesting my opinions' – Learning aims (LM/1st – 201113)

I will learn...	(1) how to understand an issue comprehensively;
I will learn...	(2) how to express my feelings properly after I have a clear understanding of the issue;
I will learn...	(3) to express my ideas from the perspectives of people who are involved in the issue;
I will learn...	(4) to illustrate my opinions on the issue with reasonable reasons.

Miss Matilda asserted that using 'I' could convey a certain belief that students take responsibility for the task in hand:

I will ask every student to set up a goal after they finish the evaluation of a task. When they have set a goal in their learning, if I think that was not enough, I will give them help. For example, in a group discussion topic, a student said she wanted to improve her speaking skills. In some cases, if I think that she can do more, I will ask the student to think of one more thing to improve. (TM/2nd – 190214)

Miss Matilda showed above that students are being taught to set goals within their learning tasks. It also indicates that the teachers are content with their implementation and that they now have a strong belief in the strategy of self-regulated learning.

Table 4 demonstrates that the students are able to use the message of 'I' to conduct a self-evaluation task. As per the literal meaning of the items, the students are able to listen to their own voices – to know more about 'what I did well this time...' and 'what should I improve next time...'

Table 4. Self-evaluation form (Topic – 'Doing a discussion') (LM/3rd – 150514)

	What I did well this time...	What should I improve next time
Nancy	I can find the related information from the website. I can manage to speak politely to others.	I have to learn to speak loudly even if I sometimes feel nervous. I have to learn to ask questions and invite questions during a discussion.
William	My articulation was quite clear this time. I had listened to others carefully. Based on different questions, I could contribute to the related arguments.	I avoided eye-contact. I have to learn to face others when I am talking. I tried to help others to organise their points, but I failed. I have to learn best to find out key points. I have to be confident and be calmer when I am speaking.

	What I did well this time...	What should I improve next time
Ben	I had used the examples I prepared from the webside – how to use pocket money properly. When some of the classmates did not clearly express their ideas, I tried to understand their thoughts and repated this to the others. I shared my ideas clearly.	I have to learn to be polite and considerate when I invite others to express their views. I have to learn to avoid, 'little gestures' during discussions.
Jason	I considered my ideas carefully before I spoke. I listened to others attentively. I respected everyone's views.	I have to learn to process the questions and others' ideas quickly; so that I know how to respond accordingly.

This is a good starting point to assist the teachers to be more creative and accept new ideas in order to enhance their teaching environments. The teacher demonstrated that she not only accepts the students' ideas, but can also expand the ideas and make them more applicable. Miss Matilda showed that she could help students to develop their learning goals and, crucially, that self-regulated learning strategies can be taught.

Educational practice and implication

Based on the evidence in my study, engaging students' voices is one of the essential elements that can drive the application cycle of self-regulated learning strategies (Byrnes, 2004). My study indicates that through the process of goal-setting and reflection (i.e. from others or self), students demonstrated that they were more effective in expressing their ideas, had a better understanding of their own needs and learned to appreciate their peers. Swain (1993) also believes that this learning behaviour is beneficial for the development of students with learning difficulties as they are generally regarded as dependent and powerless. Additionally, my results reveal that the benefits of valuing the students' voices go beyond an improvement in the students' own learning. The teachers in my study admitted that listening to the students' views was a constructive way to improve their teaching planning, as well as responding to the students' real needs (Byrnes & Rickards, 2011).

We have learnt that there are some constraints in the educational system in Hong Kong which might not allow this to happen, for instance, the exam-based system, the teaching time-frame (i.e. teachers have to finish teaching a particular part of the curriculum), class size, etc. However, as the impacts above demonstrate, it is time to think about the importance of creating an environment that makes students feel that they are legitimately "involved" in schools (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Involving the students' voices could also help a school to become more democratic (Lewis & Porter, 2007). In line with my data following the implementation of self-regulated learning strategies: the students and the teachers have increased respect for each other. Therefore, this practice should not only be considered in a special educational context. In the mainstream context, I believe it is also important to celebrate the mutual communications and the mutual appreciation between the students and teachers. Valuing students' voices might have an impact on the students' learning, pedagogical practice and the school culture in different educational contexts.

In future research when we design how best to listen to the students' voices, especially in a special educational context, we have to think about the 'voice' more broadly. From my study evidence, the students might not be good at writing; however, they can use their IT skills (e.g. typing skills) to express themselves. This example demonstrates that we have to pay attention to re-conceptualising the meaning of voice, participation and engagement as well as the application of IT in special education teaching.

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