A summary of research on Self Managed Learning

The use of Self Managed Learning with young people has been extensively researched. The most recent independent research study has been by Freedman (2019). This has focused on a follow-up of ex-students to see what impact SML has had on their lives.

Of the research studies carried out from the University of Brighton, the following eight are particularly informative in this context. They are Capp, 2014; Dufflen, 2010; Edmonds, 2015; Mayes, 2008; Mathews, 2016; Mehtola, 2013; Sankey,2008 and Worley, 2015. There are also evaluation studies of programmes at Neale-Wade Community College, Cambridge; South Harringay Junior School, London; St Luke's School, Portsmouth; Tetherdown Primary School, London and Uckfield Community Technology College, East Sussex on the Centre for Self Managed Learning website.

Parents/carers views of SML College

The following is an extract from Mayes, 2008, in her words.

"How the students had changed collectively fits into three key themes: a boost in confidence, motivation and aspirations, and to the majority of parents were what they considered unexpected outcomes.

> "He's much calmer, he's much happier, he's much more confident, his self-esteem has been enormously boosted and he has got a forum for his voice - he's found a voice for himself that people will listen to."

Several lessons have been seen to have been learnt;

> "[Child's name] has finally realized that he has got to be responsible for himself and if he doesn't start identifying what it is he wants to achieve in his life, and how he is going to achieve it, then it is not going to get done and he will have no-one to blame apart from himself."

This acknowledgment may seem harsh for a young teenager but is indeed a necessary outcome for a self managed mindset and he has thus embraced responsibility in order to reach his goals, or at least knows he has to, to do it.

What I found to be the most rewarding remark was the fact that every parent interviewed exclaimed their delight in the fact that their child hasn't wanted to miss a day since they started at the College and all morning fights or absence excuses were a thing of the past.

The parents' perceived ability for their child to use SML and how it reflected in other areas of the student's life was encouraging. If they hadn't seen a definitive improvement already, the parents at least recognised potential or saw parts of it in how their children approached their work.

> *"I think that as she has only got a couple of years left before she applies to college, she sees that that is kind of imminent and she sees that two years is really not a lot of time, so she is now getting herself together."*

The experience so far in terms of the College's influence on her child's growth has left one mother oozing confidence.

> *"There are 14-year olds here and obviously they are looking at GCSEs and things like that. My son is not at that stage yet, but I think the longer he is here, the more he will be focusing on his future and what he wants to do – finding out what GCSEs he wants to take if he does!"*

The determination not to impose expectations or superfluous anxieties is prominent here and typical of the parents' position on education at SMLC. The fact that the students were trying all sorts of different things and were obviously relaying that prospect to their parents, satisfied those I interviewed greatly.

When asked if there was anything they would like to see their child additionally doing or pursuing, all parents were adamant that their child would make their right choices or were actively already doing so.

> *"Obviously I want [him] to fulfil his potential, but that is much further down my agenda now, on my list of priorities, because I think that [he is] so much more confident…"*

For one parent, although happy and convinced the College suited her child exceptionally well, admitted she was finding it difficult not knowing what could lie in store for her daughter, saying; *"I think like every mum, it is just wanting that crystal ball thing – I would just like to know what she is going to do when she leaves here."*, even though she added, as long as her daughter was progressing, that would be enough to assure her.

Outside of the College, and in other areas of their lives, the students were seen to self-manage their own social lives and financial situations. Confidence, again, was a major factor and it was maintained that the College's influence contributed to their new-found self assurance.

Being asked to elaborate on this, one parent deliberated:

> *"I suppose from [the students'] point of view, it is a sort of inspiration because whatever they want to do – a way is found for them. So, they start thinking that most things are actually possible. Whereas the other way is that nothing is possible, and everything is too hard …and then you just get; 'I can't do this, I can't do that.'"*

Follow-up study of former students of SML College.

This section contains extracts from an independent research study by Freedman, 2019. Part 1 of Freedman's research was based on a questionnaire-based study. In his Part 2

(discussed here) he has been conducting interviews with past students, generally those who have left some years ago.

The main reason for the research has been to test our assertions that the experience of Self Managed Learning has positive effects after the individuals have left the College. Like other research cited it has been important to have the study carried out by someone independent of the College.

In summary the evidence is hugely positive. In the small number of examples where ex-students were less positive there were no negative effects of attending the College. All this compares with research on school leavers, many of whom report significant long-term damage from attending school (see, for example, the evidence on the damaging effects of bullying and of the negative impact on individual's careers through schooling).

Here are the opening lines of the report:

"SML College is an environment for learning which operates almost entirely counter to the prevailing logic of the educational mainstream. Its stated aim is simple: 'Preparing young people for the test of life not a life of tests.' This study seeks to provide an answer to the question: Has Self Managed Learning College been successful in its aim?

The simple answer is yes. Evidence from survey responses and in-depth follow up interviews demonstrates an overwhelming majority of successes defined by any measure. This is despite a student intake which contained a disproportionately high number of additional support needs, some of whom had been written off by mainstream education. While it is impossible to know how students would have fared had they not attended the college, their responses demonstrate that in their view SML College almost always had a positive, and in some cases transformative, effect on their lives. This effect was most pronounced in students who arrived with profound psychological needs, but was present across the sample. What is it about SML College that made this possible?"

Freedman later comments:

"The hypothesis that it was often the negative experience of school that caused issues, rather than the other way around, is supported by interview data; of the students interviewed who suffered from depression and/or anxiety, all of them attributed the development of their mental health issues to their experiences in school. One explained, "… it was all of it from going to the school. Bullying was the biggest part. I was fine and happy at home."

Further support for the idea that the experience of school was a significant cause of these issues is provided by the simple fact that young people and their families expected, or at the very least hoped, that leaving school and joining the SML College would help to address them. In many cases this expectation was proved correct."

The core of Freedman's report is around what he labelled:

"Life After SML College"

Here is are extracts from that section of his report.

"Evidence suggests that for a significant number of students it was attendance at SML College which enabled them to get to a point where they were able to attend further education or sixth form college. In some cases this meant facilitating the development of the emotional and psychological wellbeing needed for further education; in others this meant support in achieving the necessary qualifications, in others it meant support preparing applications, for some it was a combination of such factors, and for a few it meant facilitating the identification of new interests which motivated young people to continue studying."

"Interestingly, of the five students who had not continued to pursue further education, four are currently engaged in work they love, and two are operating at a level which far surpasses the norm for young people of their ages. One (aged 18) is head of tech for a research and development company, one (aged 19) is the production manager for an events management company which organises major UK festivals, one (aged 26) is playing in bands, running events and teaching music, and one (aged 22) is a pub supervisor, a job she does because it is fun. With the right attitude and support, further education is not necessary for an excellent work life. The remaining twelve in-work ex-students are in a diverse range of occupations; two carers, two designers, two shop assistants, a psychiatric nurse, a plumber, a chef, an SEO specialist, a sound engineer, and a PR specialist for a charity. Are there any identifiable patterns in the work choices of ex-students? It does seem that there is a tendency towards creative and helping professions."

In a later part of this section of the report Freedman considered issue of wellbeing. As we know wellbeing at a young age is the most important factor in later life satisfaction so his evidence on this is important. Here are extracts from that section of the report.

"Psychological Wellbeing

As detailed in Interim Report 1, the survey included a measure of psychological wellbeing taken as a combination of scores in six distinct domains; autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance. The intention of including this measure was not to produce data which would enable the assessment of the impact of SML College, or comparison to other groups (impossible without valid control or comparison groups beyond the scope of this study) but to identify potential trends worth exploring further in the interview phase. The two most pronounced trends warranting further exploration which emerged
are discussed here. Other more subtle trends are addressed in the subsequent section.

1) In general, students appeared to have relatively high levels of psychologically wellbeing. This is notable given the number of ex-students who had at some point been identified as having being pathologically psychologically unwell.

It is abundantly clear from both the survey and interview data that in the opinions of ex-students, attending SML College very often had a positive impact on mental health and psychological well-being, both considered globally and in terms of the sub-domains described above. In some cases, as the students themselves see it, attending meant the difference between the relatively stable and happy life they enjoy now, and the misery and mental ill-health they imagine had they not attended. Further, the positive impact on

wellbeing was not limited to students who arrived with an identified affective disorder and was also described (especially in terms of impact on subdomains such as self-acceptance and purpose in life) by students with no additional support needs.

2) Students scored extremely highly in the measure of personal growth. Does this relate to the experience of the colleges learning groups which emphasises detailed consideration of future aspirations and the route to achieving them?

The scores of ex-students on the personal growth domain were so phenomenally high that it was necessary to consider the possibility that this was a relic of the measurement tool rather than are flection of the characteristics of ex-students. While the metric has been validity tested for use with younger populations, it seems fair to suggest that the items used to measure attitudes to personal growth, - for example 'For me life has been a continuous process of learning changing and growth' - could cause a skew towards high scores in young populations such as this one. Though it is thus possible that part of the cause of high scores in attitudes to personal growth may be the way this domain was measured, data from the survey and interviews does indicate a very positive attitude to personal growth, both in ex-students who were highly satisfied with their lives at this time, and in those who were less so. Several explicitly connected this attitude to their time at SML College. "

Freedman's next section looked at the positive influence and benefits of attending SML College. As he explained in this extract:

"The forms this positive influence took can be divided into two broad domains; cognitive benefits (e.g., development of a particular skill), and non-cognitive benefits (e.g., developing confidence). Of these, non-cognitive benefits were the far more frequently mentioned category. This may be because improvements in non-cognitive domains were more common. It is also possible that this type of influence was more likely to be mentioned retrospectively because it has had a more significant influence on students' lives.

In the text below, benefits have been divided into categories. Where relevant, subgroups within each category are mentioned and a brief explanation of how the college facilitated the benefit is provided. For each category, two direct quotes from ex-students are provided to enable insight into the way students understood the positive influence of the college as well as the sources this analysis was drawn from.

Cognitive Benefits

*Specific Skills / Qualification***:** For many students, the development of particular skills and the achievement of qualifications was an important benefit of attendance at the College. In some cases, the achievements of skills and qualifications represented huge improvements on personal and external expectations.
"It helped massively with my confidence and English and maths skills."
"The heartfelt kind and understanding teachers helped me get my horrendous basic academic skills (English and math) up to the best level I believe was possible in the amount of time I was there."

*Attitude to learning***:** Frequently mentioned in parallel to specific skills were improvements in attitudes towards learning and the development of a specific passion or a general passion for

learning and education. Attitudinal changes were facilitated by the lack of compulsion and freedom to choose.

"SMLC taught me to be creative by giving me the option to learn about music from really lovely people which in turn made me decide I wanted to do something in the music industry which led me to what I do now for a living, a job I absolutely love."

"I know, appreciate and respect the value of education because has it has not forced upon me in a careless and rigid way."

Non-Cognitive Benefits

Autonomy: Many students described benefits which coalesce around the term autonomy; the capacity to self manage, independence, responsibility and self-motivation. These developments were enabled by the self-managing process and the combination of freedom and real responsibility students are required to take for themselves and the College.

"I can say that everything I've done has been my own choice. And knowing that I have this freedom continues to inform my decisions and thus makes me very happy. I can't blame anyone else for these choices and I can't be 'sour' because things haven't worked out for me."

"I think it was really important for me to be in charge of my learning. I need flexibility a lot of the time and that wasn't at all possible in mainstream school. I'm a lot more confident in myself to be independent now."

Sense of Self / Mental Health: SML College supported students to be and become themselves, accept themselves for who they were, and improve and maintain mental health. These processes were described as being enabled by the non-judgemental accepting atmosphere in which students felt valued, safe and secure.

"It made me feel like an actual individual rather than just another name on a sheet, I have so many good memories from SMLC"

"I find myself to be much more emotionally mature than my peers. I know myself - who I am, what I need, what I want - much better than anyone else I know."

Life Direction / Sense of Purpose: For several students, SML College supported the development of a clear sense of direction and purpose in life, either in terms of a short or long term strategy or in terms of a specific passion to pursue. In both cases, it was the combination of freedom and support which facilitated this benefit.

"It allowed me to focus on what I wanted to do with my life and provided support for that."

"Helped me to make a strategy for my future"

Social Skills: The most frequently mentioned benefit was the opportunity to make friends and develop social skills. For many individuals, this was absolutely the most important thing they needed at that point in their lives. The atmosphere of the College combined with the freedom of choice and movement facilitated the development social skills and making friends.

"SMLC provided a safe environment in which I could learn and enjoy social interactions."

"I think socialising was the biggest and most positive thing I got out of my experience."

Self Efficacy: One of the most commonly mentioned benefits was improvements in confidence and self-efficacy. It seems likely that this improvement was mediated by some combination of all the factors mentioned above, with the relative contribution of each depending on the individual.

"It helped me to be confident in being myself and knowing that I was free to be interested in and love whatever I want."

"Although I don't think I got a lot out of SMLC academically, I think it really helped me to increase my confidence and connect back into society after having been very isolated.""

The following are some of the issues identified by students in five schools who experienced SML. These are taken from the independent research studies.

Students found the chance to talk to each other, and to be listened to, was a real feature - and that they had time to step back and think, as opposed to the normal rushed school day. They appreciated the value of sharing ideas and contacts amongst each other so that, as a peer group, they were able to support each other. They also commented that the peer group provided a good influence as regards behaviour in the school. The idea that they could help each other is important as they mostly commented that, in class, they didn't get that opportunity.

The fact that the process was enjoyable was something that they saw as a nice relief from the pressures of school life. The fact that it wasn't lessons and it was something else was very much appreciated. Incid

They liked being able to talk with adults as equals and we kept up our model of being on first name terms with students we worked with, even though this was not the norm in the school. They appreciated not being shouted at, but rather having an opportunity to talk on an equal basis with the learning group adviser.

Whilst they appreciated the support that they gave each other, they also realised that challenges within the group were of value. One student had been particularly critical of teachers and their peers in the group challenge them about their own behaviour, that may have brought on the problems they had with teachers.

They talked a lot about having personal control and being able to think for themselves. This fits with the locus of control idea, namely that at a meta-level we were encouraging the notion that they could take control of their own lives, even if they felt there were limitations within the school.

They liked the opportunity to be creative and develop real ideas and put them into practice. Some commented about moving beyond just dreaming about something to actually making it happen – and the challenge that they had to do that. Within that, developing their priorities was seen as an important feature, as many were used to the school laying down priorities - and the fact that they were challenged to think through what was important and what wasn't so important was new and useful.

The idea of looking to the future and thinking about life and career was valuable to most students and that there were no limits being put on what they could think about. This opportunity to have thinking time, they felt, made a real difference.

They liked the fact that it was confidential - that we would not share anything outside the group without permission. The only time we might want to take something out is if there was a real child protection issue - though that never occurred in any of the in-school programmes

that we were involved in. They believed that this confidentiality rule allowed for more personal connection and that just being with others where they would not be being judged or laughed at was really important.

Some recognised that their own confidence levels had increased by being on the programme and that they felt more secure in trying out new things. This was also linked to the fact that they felt they got a wider view of learning - they started to realise that learning was something that was beyond what was in the classroom. The opportunity to learn from each other and from going on trips or from bringing in visitors allowed them to see that there were many ways in which they could learn things that would be of value to them.

Conclusion

The above material is just a small snapshot of the extensive evaluations carried out on SML with young people. However there are many large scale research studies of the use of SML in organisations and these are summarised in Cunningham, 1999, and Cunningham et al, 2000.

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