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Group work during visual art activities to reduce indecisiveness

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Background: The Foundation Phase in education provides the primary building blocks for children's foundation and development. From personal experiences as educators, we observed that young learners who work together in small groups during art activities gain self-confidence faster than indecisive learners who work alone. Indecisive learners become hesitant and lack confidence when they are allowed own choices during art activities. In line with Vygotsky's social constructivism, this article assumed that social interaction fosters learning and development in learners.

Aim: The aim of this study was to observe whether group work promotes decisive behaviour and self-confidence in learners.

Setting: A group of five Grade R learners in a privately owned pre-primary school in Pretoria was targeted for the purpose of this investigation.

Methods: This article followed a qualitative approach in the form of a multiple case study that focused on four young learners who showed indecisive behaviour and one learner who showed decisive behaviour during a visual art activity. Learners' conversations and participation were observed and recorded as they used photographs and artefacts in the group art activity.

Results: Over time, the four indecisive learners had improved and gained confidence towards decisiveness. These results support Vygotsky's theory that skilled learners can scaffold the unskilled ones to reach their full potential.

Conclusion: The results in this article point to the importance of collaborative learning in classrooms to improve confidence and decision-making. It is, therefore, recommended that teachers use a group work strategy to improve learning and decisiveness in classrooms.

Introduction

Educators often experience some of their learners to be indecisive in the classroom, where these learners battle to start a project or assignment. Hesitance and lack of confidence in young learners are often noted when they are confronted with the challenge of making their own choices during visual art activities. Familiar phrases uttered by such indecisive learners are as follows: 'I can't do it', 'I don't know how to do it' or 'I don't know what to make'.

Indecisiveness is a cause of concern, as decision-making is one of the core skills that children require to adapt in a changing society. This is also true regarding an education context, as it relates to their striving and perseverance in learning tasks (Steinbeis & Crone 2016:28). Singer and Bashir (1999:266) relate decision-making and planning to executive functions that are 'invoked at the outset of a task and in the face of a novel challenge'. Samuels et al. (2016:478) define executive functioning 'as a set of control processes that allow individuals to manage and direct their attention, thoughts and actions to meet adaptive goals'. It is, therefore, crucial to support learners to overcome this indecisiveness as it exerts an influence on their education in particular and their adaption to society in general. Research has shown that visual art activities have an influence on young learners' holistic development, ranging from cognitive development to problem-solving skills; however, very little research has been carried out on learners' indecisiveness in the Foundation Phase. In addition, art activities nurture creativity and imaginary thinking in learners; therefore, it is a good option to research indecisiveness in the Foundation Phase.

Background

The environment in which young learners are raised and educated

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (Shonkoff et al. 2011:6), environments that enhance executive functioning depend on adult–child relationships that guide

the child from complete reliance on adult support to a 'gradual assumption of the "executive" role for themselves'. Parents and teachers are the key role players in the education of the emergent learner and are essentially responsible for sustained guidance, constant encouragement and carefully considered influence (Pretorius 1998:9). They should endeavour to provide a learning environment that allows room for independent decision-making, as the freedom to choose will strengthen the learners' characters (Zijlstra 2012:25). It is, therefore, crucial that adults who are responsible for the education of children create a learning space that is conducive to the development of executive functions.

If, however, the home environment becomes negative, the young learners' scholastic experiences are influenced negatively and their development is hindered (Buist, Deković & Prinzie 2013:104). This form of neglect and dominance then often manifests as indecisive behaviour in the classroom. Research has shown that there are numerous factors that contribute to unhappy or insecure home environments (Turner, Finkelhor & Ormrod 2012:210). Young learners need a safe and secure environment for successful development and positive behaviour to take place.

The environment of a classroom, where there are opportunities to express themselves through creativity, also proves to be of essence for young learners' impending development (Berger 2009:268). Researchers maintain that when young learners engage in visual art activities, the process thereof is natural and spontaneous (Mayesky 2006:245). Young learners should be allowed to make own choices during art activities, because not only do they become adept through this process but independent making of choices also contributes to their self-confidence and promotes positive behaviour.

The importance of visual art in the Foundation Phase

According to Koster (2012:229), visual art can be defined as creating something through means of line, shape, colour, hues, form, texture, pattern and space in a two- or three-dimensional context. During the process of creating visual artwork, learners are engaged in an explorative way where they experiment, discover, repeat things if it did not work the first time, and are actively involved with the materials (Fox & Schirrmacher 2012:6).

Berger (2009:268) states that creativity in preschools should be encouraged because it contributes to knowledge and skills. As learners create artwork, they often interact with one another through conversing and sharing ideas and knowledge (Edwards 2004:38). Not only does this have an influence on their knowledge but it also contributes to their language and cognitive skills, because, as Koster (2012:5) states, when learners are interactive with other learners within the chosen environment, the neurons inside the brain grow at a faster rate, which may in turn foster the development and strengthening of executive functions, which are the key to learning and decision-making (Singer & Bashir 1999). Eckhoff

(2008:463) mentions that visual art is a wonderful field for learners' learning to take place and that it contributes to learners' development as a whole, in other words holistically (Henning 2011:159).

Mayesky (2006:245) maintains that art, for learners, is a natural process and that they do it spontaneously. Therefore, visual art plays a role in how learners succeed in their later school years because of the contribution it makes to the different developmental areas of learners, such as cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (Koster 2012:5–6; Wesson 2006:40). Fox and Schirrmacher (2012:33) proclaim that visual art should be included in the greater part of the curriculum for young learners and should not be taken lightly.

Allowing learners to make choices

Learners are researchers in their own right because they experiment with opportunities through own decisions (Cangelosi 2014:62–63; Wiseman & Hunt 2013:115). Responsibility for choices made, and making own choices, could contribute to education because educators can witness the needs of young learners. Therefore, teachers should not withhold opportunities from learners to make own choices, but rather support and motivate them and create an art environment where they can make their own choices.

If, however, learners enter a classroom as indecisive, they will not be able to enjoy or even experience the benefits that making own choices holds for their development. These learners would be plagued by doubts in their own capabilities. They would be too afraid to try things by themselves and would be dependent on others (Patalano & LeClair 2011:163). Social constructivism has proven to be very valuable for young learners who need the support of a stronger learner to reach their own potential capability (Fox & Schirrmacher 2012:73; Powell & Kalina 2009:245). According to Vygotsky's theory on social development, knowledge is gained when social interaction among people occurs (Eloff & Ebersöhn 2004:401). During the process of art-making, young learners often engage with others, whether it is through communication, observation or working together in groups. It is through this interaction with others that young learners often gain skills, knowledge and, most importantly, overcome their low self-esteem that interferes with independent decision-making (Patalano & LeClair 2011:171).

In order for young learners to make own choices or to engage with other learners in groups to promote self-confidence for making own choices during visual art activities, there should be adequate time during the day for visual art. Unfortunately, the allocated time for visual art for Grade R learners, according to the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of South African schools, is only approximately 1 h a week (Department of Education 2011:6). Researchers suggest that visual art deserves a bigger part of the curriculum for young learners. Artwork in itself supports the development of problem-solving, social, language and mathematical skills.

If visual art has so many benefits for young learners, then adjusting the curriculum should be considered.

Group work alleviates or overcomes indecisive behaviour

According to Westergaard (2009), the definition of a group is as follows:

> a group made up of individuals with shared needs who will benefit from the opportunity to work with, and learn from others in order to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes. (p. 6)

Group work has proven to benefit young learners at school immensely. Young learners who engage with other learners in a group structure experience education more positively; they feel more positive about the other learners and also work more effectively because they feel positive about themselves (Johnson & Johnson 1988:35–36).

A study conducted by Patalano and LeClair (2011:171) yielded findings that highlight the value of group work as a measure against indecisive behaviour. It was discovered that when learners work together in groups, they tend to have more self-confidence than when they work alone as indecisive individuals groping in the dark. Learners not only gain knowledge about the task at hand that is performed in a group context but they also gain knowledge about themselves and how their own role plays a part of the group as a whole (Westergaard 2009:6).

The literature studied for this research gave significant insight into the benefits of visual art and own choice-making for young learners' development. The literature on Vygotsky's theory of social development enabled the researcher to understand that a stronger learner can support other learners to reach their potential capabilities. Vygotsky (1896–1934), in Eloff and Ebersöhn (2004:401), bases his theory of social development on the fact that a person's brain gets stimulated and developed from their environment and their social involvement with other people. His collected works focus essentially on his theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), as he believes that when learners are supported by an adult or a stronger peer, they can transfer from their actual developmental level to their potential capability (Knox & Stevens 1993:305).

Theoretical perspectives

Vygotsky believes in the value of social interaction and claims that learners learn at their best when they actively engage with the learning content and interact with one another (Powell & Kalina 2009:245). This article focuses on young learners' indecisive behaviour during visual art activities and the hypothesis that social interaction could support them to overcome this indecision. Vygotsky strongly believes in the ZPD, which is the ability within learners that is in charge of how they learn (Gordon & Browne 2008:150; Powell & Kalina 2009:244).

According to Charlesworth and Lind (2007:16), all learners have a certain level of capability, which is known as the emergent learners' *actual capability*. Charlesworth and Lind (2007:16) further proclaim that with the necessary support from an adult or more capable peers, these learners could reach a higher potential, known as the learners' *potential capability*. The zone in between a young learner's actual capability and potential capability is the ZPD. It is in this zone where a learner's capability can be enriched. Scaffolding, according to Newman and Holzman (1993:67) is the assistance one provides young learners to reach their potential capability. It is metaphorically seen as a bridge to cross over from the actual capability to the potential capability.

Group work in the classroom could provide such a scaffold for indecisive learners to reach their potential capability. According to MacNaugton and Williams (2004:105), there are various types of groupings that are all beneficial for 5-year-old learners, such as informal, multi-age and mixed culture groups. The method of scaffolding is mostly temporary because at a certain stage of the learning process, learners are able to do projects on their own and work independently (Coffey 2009:2).

Vygotsky focuses further on the social aspects of learners' learning capabilities through the act called *social constructivism* (Liu & Matthews 2005:388). According to Charlesworth and Lind (2007:15), social constructivism entails learners gaining new information from the environment in which they find themselves, while interacting with one another. Young learners often engage with one another through conversing and sharing ideas. Therefore, the classroom environment is ideal for scaffolding to take place. The environment offers the assistance of an educator as well as that of more capable peers, who can support indecisive learners during visual art activities. Such support and guidance could not only lead indecisive learners to achieve their potential capabilities but could also support them to gain confidence to explore the environment.

Research methodology and design

A qualitative research approach, involving case studies, was used for this research study. The subjective method of collecting data from the participants gave significant insight to indecisive behaviour (cf. Maree 2007:257). A multiple case study investigated own choice-making with regard to visual art activities. One decisive Grade R learner and four indecisive Grade R learners were identified for this study. The reason for this was to see what a decisive learner is already capable of and how indecisive behaviour suppresses indecisive learners' capabilities.

Research site and participants

A small, privately owned school in a suburb of Pretoria was the site where this research was conducted. It consists of one Grade R class, one Grade 00 class and one Grade 000 class. The school hosts children from different countries' embassies, and also children from in and around Pretoria with English

as the main language of instruction. Twenty-five young learners formed part of the Grade R class and, being the beginning of the school year, it was easy to distinguish the decisive and indecisive learners from one another. The classroom had all the appropriate learning stations and the art station provided the learners with choices of materials and art equipment.

This qualitative study involved multiple case studies; therefore, one decisive learner and four indecisive learners from the Grade R group were selected. Purposeful sampling was used for the selection of these five participants.

Data collection and analysis

Observations, spontaneous conversations, photographs and artefacts allowed for investigating whether group work alleviated or overcame indecisive behaviour. Observations were recorded in a reflective journal where reflections were made on feelings, ideas and suggestions. The spontaneous conversations were recorded with the permission of parents and later transcribed. Photographs proved to be valuable when observing the learners over a period of time to see if and how progression towards decisiveness took place. Inductive data analysis allowed categories to emerge from the coding of the data and allowed for an ongoing process where the researcher could 'double check' or go back to the previous stage to rectify or refine the analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from and granted by the University of Pretoria (clearance no. EC 13/08/01).

Results

The study focused on the effect of group work on indecisive learners in the Foundation Phase during visual art activities. The research findings are discussed according to the five participants, with specific interest on how the indecisive learners gradually became more decisive. The data analysis and interpretation process took 3 months to complete.

The decisive learner

It was important to look at a decisive learner to see what the benchmark of decisive behaviour was, and to work towards this goal with the indecisive learners.

Golokile

Most of the time Golokile preferred to sit next to friends of hers. She would interact with her friends with ease and was never hesitant to help them when they struggled. She had the self-confidence to communicate with others, as well as to explain why she went about her artwork (see Figure 1) the way she did. She never showed signs of fear or hesitation (see Box 1).

During group work opportunities, Golokile was always eager to help learners who struggled by showing them how a certain thing is done.
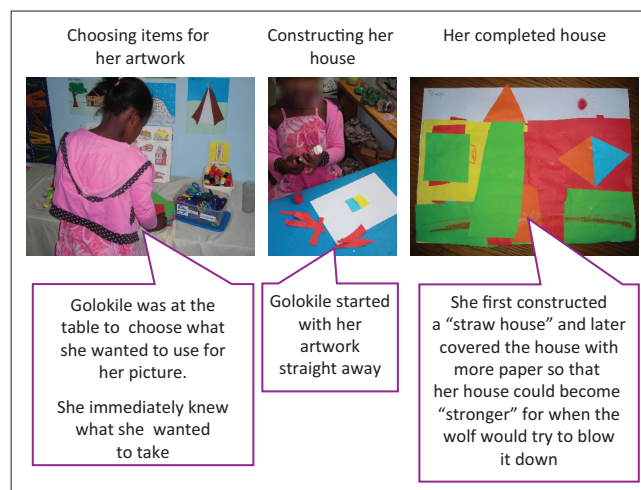

Choosing items for her artwork — Golokile was at the table to choose what she wanted to use for her picture. She immediately knew what she wanted to take

Constructing her house — Golokile started with her artwork straight away

Her completed house — She first constructed a "straw house" and later covered the house with more paper so that her house could become "stronger" for when the wolf would try to blow it down

FIGURE 1: Golokile working on her picture.

BOX 1: Diary entry – Golokile.

Golokile did not hesitate to start with her project. Although she started off with one idea (making a straw house that the wolf can blow down) she later chose to make her house 'stronger'. I was quick to think that Golokile was being silly about her artwork, but I came to realise that there was an ongoing thinking process and that there was a reason behind her sticking papers all over her almost finished artwork. I realised that she was thinking in the way a child would think. However, I did not realise that at first. She was never once hesitant and was talkative and excited throughout the project.

BOX 2: Interview entry: Leago.

Researcher:	'Why did you choose to draw yourself with crayons?'
Leago:	'Because I thought that it would be much harder with the other materials'.
Researcher:	'Do you think you are a little scared to try the other materials?'
Leago:	'Uh Hu…'

The indecisive learners

There were four identified learners that portrayed indecisive behaviour. This behaviour as well as the impact of group work on these learners in 10 consecutive weeks is discussed.

Leago

Leago was a learner at the particular school the previous year as well, and through observation and conversations with the other teachers, I knew that she was a very self-conscious learner who lacked self-confidence. There were numerous occasions where she showed fear of using different types of art materials and preferred to use materials that she was comfortable and familiar with. When I asked her about this and why she did not try other available material, she would mention that she was scared to use them (see Box 2).

Leago showed obvious lack of self-confidence when the study commenced, but group work allowed her to gain more confidence.

It was evident that Leago was more at ease and relaxed when she worked among her friends. After giving Leago opportunities to make her own choices with regard to her own artwork, alongside peers, she started to become a relaxed learner who enjoyed her work as well as education itself, because fear did not hold her back anymore.

Mindy and a decisive learner working together on their farm picture	The end product of an indecisive and decisive learner working together
Mindy and a decisive learner worked together on a drawing. She did not seem dominated or overwhelmed and the end results were amazing.	Upon asking Mindy why she enjoys working with a friend, her response was that if she struggles, her friend could help her.

FIGURE 2: Mindy interacting with a decisive learner.

Mindy

Mindy started at the preschool during the third term of the previous year. She was extremely emotional when her parents dropped her off at school and would cling to the mother frantically until the teacher had to separate them. At first Mindy did not want to interact with other learners at all (see Box 3).

In her own time, Mindy started interacting with other learners in the classroom (see Figure 2).

After group work, it was evident how social development had taken place. A lot of thought went into the artwork and it was not only the work of one learner. They spoke to one another, shared ideas and listened to each other's remarks. One of the key points of creating the artwork together was communication. When the decisive learner spoke to Mindy, she was in a way 'required' to talk back. This allowed her to realise that she also had a 'voice' and that she really was allowed to make choices too.

Verne

Verne started preschool for the very first time this year. He had never been in a preschool before and he was overwhelmed by the new surroundings, all the new learners and a new teacher, who were all unfamiliar to him. He appeared a bit lost and unsettled.

The three field text entries in Box 4, which happened on separate occasions, depict what I observed.

Group work allowed Verne to engage with the other learners and in due time he realised that it can be enjoyable (see Figure 3).

Collaborative work seemed to pay off. Together, Verne and his friend drew a farm picture that had a pig as well as a barn.

Along with the decisive learner, Verne decided that the barn should have windows as well as a trapdoor so that the animals could 'escape' if there were to be any trouble. I never imagined Verne getting to a point where he would be able to use his imagination so confidently.

Khego

Khego came into the class at the beginning of the year and did not seem like an emotional or scared learner. It was only upon observation that I noticed that he lacked self-confidence and could not make choices for himself, which led to the suspicion that he was an indecisive learner.

Although Khego took a very long time to show some decisive behaviour, even though it was just a little bit, it surfaced with constant motivation and the support of a more capable learner (see Figure 4).

Discussion

Social interaction benefits young learners because they actively engage with one another, where a decisive learner can support an indecisive learner and confidence is inculcated (Berger 2009:254). This interaction was beneficial for the indecisive participants because the more capable peers assisted indecisive learners to reach their full potential (Newman & Holzman 1993:67). Vygotsky emphasises the importance of socialisation among learners and through the group work it was evident that indecisive learners could reach their full potential (Charlesworth & Lind 2007:15; Kim 2006:26).

While observing the learners during the research process, it was apparent that decisive learners found it much easier to interact with others. Indecisive learners, in turn, found it much harder. It was especially evident during free-play periods, where learners could choose what they wanted to do and what they wanted to play with, that the indecisive learners would keep to themselves. Interestingly enough, although these learners preferred to be by themselves most of the time, group work, which was incorporated with art activities, allowed indecisive learners to observe the more capable peers and this process contributed to their gaining knowledge which could otherwise have been lost (Eloff & Ebersöhn 2004:401). At first, the indecisive learners seemed self-conscious to work in cooperation with others, but the more the indecisive learners became familiar with group work, the more their willingness to communicate within the group and their confidence increased. That, in turn, allowed them to start enjoying their work and work more independently (Patalano & LeClair 2011:171).
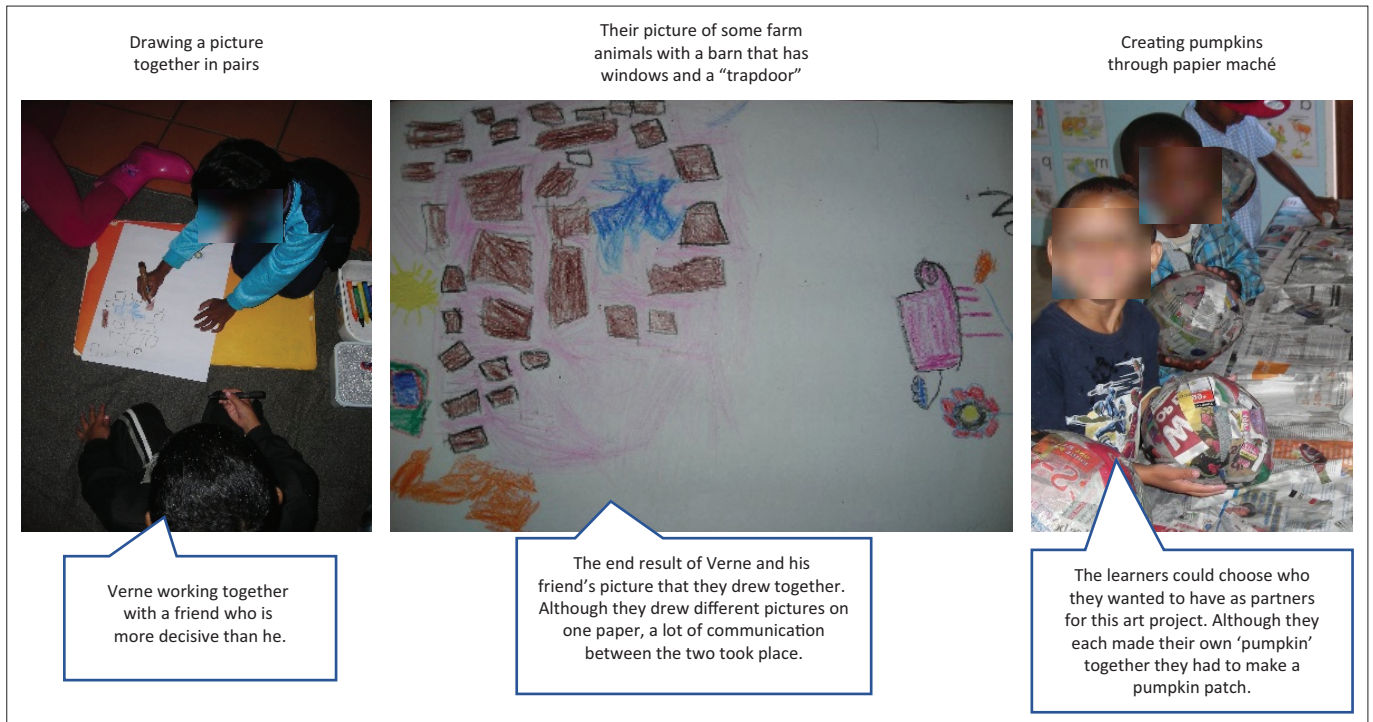
Drawing a picture together in pairs

Their picture of some farm animals with a barn that has windows and a "trapdoor"

Creating pumpkins through papier maché

Verne working together with a friend who is more decisive than he.

The end result of Verne and his friend's picture that they drew together. Although they drew different pictures on one paper, a lot of communication between the two took place.

The learners could choose who they wanted to have as partners for this art project. Although they each made their own 'pumpkin' together they had to make a pumpkin patch.

FIGURE 3: Verne became a more relaxed and happy learner.

Khego copying his friend

Khego and his friend's picture

Painting autumn trees in pairs

Khego still did not speak a lot during this activity but he did listen when his friend spoke to him.
Although Khego struggled with artwork, he often looked at what others did and tried to copy them.

Although Khego copied his friend's cow, he now knows how to draw a cow which he never knew before this interactive activity.

Khego and his friend painting a picture together. Here it is evident that Khego does more by himself instead of saying that he 'cannot' or just copying the other learner.
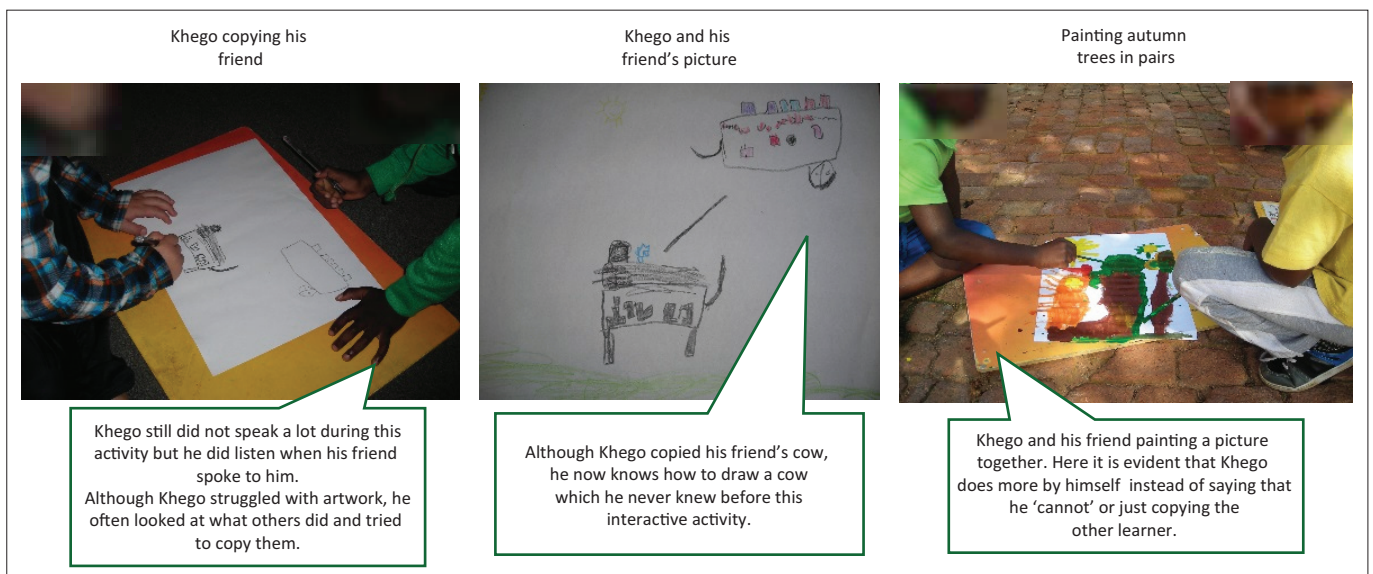
FIGURE 4: Khego gradually became decisive and part of group work.

BOX 5: Field text entry – Khego.

When he finished his work, he hid it away and I had to ask him where it is. He had hidden it under his bag inside his locker.

I noticed that Khego still looked at the other learners and what they did. He needed constant motivation to try by himself.

Group work was never intended to 'force' indecisive learners to interact with decisive learners, but merely to support their indecisiveness through social interaction as maintained by Vygotsky's theory of Social Development (Knox & Stevens 1993:305). In other words, group work was used as scaffolding (Vygotsky 1896–1934) and consisted of pairs or small groups where at least one decisive learner was present. An art project was given to the learners and choice-making had to take place within the groups. Although group work is not

considered as a 'playful' act and more based on 'working' together, it provided the opportunity for all the learners to communicate and interact with one another; that was a starting point for the indecisive learners to gain self-confidence to engage with others (Mayesky 2006:150). It also provided support for indecisive learners' overall development because although the decisive learners would take the lead, the indecisive learners would look up to them and learn new skills, knowledge and self-confidence, just as Vygotsky described in his theory of social development (Eloff & Ebersöhn 2004:401).

The more group work activities there were, the more confident and relaxed the indecisive learners became. These learners

started to give their own independent opinions and added their insights and imaginative ideas because group work enhanced their self-confidence (Patalano & LeClair 2011:171). This group work proved to equip indecisive learners with the necessary self-confidence to function independently and to arrive at a level of exercising own choices during individual activities.

Conclusion

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Department of Education 2011:2) distinguishes between three dimensions of executive functions: working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive or mental flexibility. Steinbeis and Crone (2016:28) have established a link between cognitive control and decision-making and maintain that children must be able to master the skill of bringing 'thoughts and actions into alignment with one's intentions, goals and values'. As a prerequisite for acquiring these proficiencies, an enabling environment should be created where psychological safety can be experienced (Coetzee 2007). This study explored the use of group work as a supportive measure to overcome indecisive behaviour. In 10 weeks of social interaction, indecisive learners displayed the willingness to discover and weigh options, managing their own fears and self-doubt. Their level of creativity also increased and they no longer felt shy about making independent decisions, and on the contrary became enthusiastic developers of their own potential. More capable learners often offered their support for indecisive learners and it became evident that even if the indecisive learners did not interact at first, they listened to and observed the other peers. Group interaction supported indecisive learners and in time helped them gain self-confidence to carry out their tasks on their own. They claimed their right to decide and experienced a new kind of power that had been lying dormant within them, waiting to be unleashed.

The findings of this study point to the value of group work for learners that are unsure of themselves. The researcher recommends that teachers should make use of small groups during artwork, especially where a decisive learner can support an indecisive learner. Group work allows indecisive learners to observe what other learners do and, thus, they reach their potential capability so that they have self-confidence to make own choices.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

N.S.T. wrote the literature review, was the corresponding author and attended to all revisions. L.W. was the project coordinator.

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