

# THE IMPACT OF CHILD-LED LEARNING ON TEACHER SATISFACTION AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH IN KEY STAGE I

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## Introduction

Education has come alive with discussions around child-led learning, particularly in Early Years and Key Stage 1. The impact of child-led learning on the child is well known; enhanced motivation, deeper engagement; however what is lacking is the acknowledgement of the impact it has on teachers. Teacher wellbeing has become an increasingly urgent topic in recent years with a record number of educators leaving the profession due to reasons including mounting pressures, growing workloads and increased burnout. This research project aims to bring these two themes together to investigate an area overlooked by literature and practice. This research will consider how a change in approach might affect those who implement it and challenges the notion that development takes place outside of the classroom, and explores the idea that change can happen from within.

### Background of the Problem

The transition from a play based Early Years environment to a more formal Year 1 setting can often feel misaligned with the development needs of the children. After spending a lot of time on the transition between the phases, a review of the curriculum was the natural next step in the process. Child-led learning has also become a growing priority across the primary phase however many Key Stage 2 teachers remain hesitant, perceiving it as an approach that demands more time, planning and adding pressure rather than alleviating it.

This project aimed to challenge those assumptions and to explore whether child-led learning may actually reduce workload by making learning more meaningful, and to demonstrate that it is not an 'extra' but more a 'different' way of working.

Combining the themes of child-led learning and teacher wellbeing felt meaningful and timely and this research project was created with the aim to fill the gaps in the literature and consider how a change in practice may affect those expected to embrace it.

## Literature Review

While the benefits of child-led learning for pupils have been widely documented, there is little exploration of how this pedagogical shift affects the professionals facilitating it. To support this research I have drawn on three key theoretical frameworks – Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), Rose and Rogers' (2012) concept of the 'plural practitioner', and Ryan and Deci's (1985) Self Determination Theory.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the MKO emphasises the role of the adult in scaffolding learning through interactions. In child-led learning the teacher must take on a flexible and adaptive role, stepping in and out of instruction and planning based on the child's needs and interests. This challenges traditional notions of teaching as direct instruction and instead positions the teacher as an observer and facilitator, therefore potentially transforming a teacher's professional identity.

This is supported by Rose and Roger's (2012) idea of the 'plural practitioner', a professional who wears multiple hats and is consistently reflecting on their practice. Their model supports the idea that teaching is not one dimensional. Child-led learning requires pluralism, as teachers must be responsive, creative and facilitative. Engaging in this style of pedagogy not only enriches learning for children, but also offers teachers greater satisfaction through autonomy and reflection.

Finally, Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory (1985) provides insight into the conditions that support intrinsic motivation. The theory identifies three core needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness. Child-led learning fosters these for children, but also has the potential to do the same for teachers. When teachers are trusted to respond to children's interests by making decisions in the moment they are more likely to feel empowered and competent, therefore encouraging sustained motivation and professional wellbeing.

Together these theories offer a way in which to examine the teacher's experience in a child-led classroom. In the absence of literature directly addressing this connection, they provide a strong foundation for understanding how this pedagogical approach might support not only student outcomes, but teacher growth and satisfaction, too.

## Methods

As a classroom based teacher seeking to better understand and improve my own practice, action research offered a structure that allowed me to examine real time experiences while remaining embedded in a teaching and learning environment.

Rather than researching from a distance this approach positioned me as an active participant, allowing for responsive adjustments, reflection and collaboration with colleagues. It also provided me with the flexibility to explore not just the outcomes of a new pedagogical approach, but the lived experience of implementing it, gathering experience based insights that could inform personal and professional growth. The intention was not only to understand how child-led learning affected colleagues and I, but also to offer relevant and practical findings that could benefit others considering similar shifts in approach.

## Research Questions

1. How do teachers perceive the shift in their role when embedding child-led learning, and how does this affect their motivation and engagement?
2. How does implementing child-led learning influence teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction in Key Stage 1?
3. In what way does child-led learning impact teachers' professional growth?

## Methodology

This research was conducted across five Year 1 classrooms with a focus on shifting towards a more child-led approach across continuous provision and core subjects. It followed a qualitative, reflective model grounded in professional inquiry and followed Kemmis and Targett's (1988) Action Research Spiral, of which there were three cycles.

- Cycle 1:
  - Action: Introducing child-led topics.
  - Data: Teacher reflections and observations.
  - Insight: Increased student engagement.
- Cycle 2:
  - Action: Professional dialogues and peer observations.
  - Data: Reflections and meeting notes.
  - Insight: Staff gaining confidence in stepping back.
- Cycle 3:
  - Action: Weekly reflections and planning meetings.
  - Data: Staff questionnaires and interviews.
  - Insight: Increased teacher satisfaction, more collaborative planning, enhanced professional autonomy.

## Participants

Five Year 1 teachers, including myself, reflected on the impact of child-led learning within the classroom. The other four teachers also participated in questionnaires.

Although the children were not formally studied, five classes of twenty-six children were observed to inform and guide the research process.

## Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected through a combination of reflective journalling and informal discussions in meetings. Formal questionnaires were also distributed to four teachers to gather structured feedback on the research process.

## Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model of thematic analysis. This allowed me to identify patterns and draw meaningful conclusions.

1. Familiarisation – reading collected responses to immerse myself in my data.
2. Initial Coding – manually coding data by identifying key words, phrases and ideas related to teacher motivation, wellbeing and professional identity.
3. Themes – codes were grouped into broader categories. Phrases such as 'less pressure', 'freedom' and 'joy in teaching' were grouped under one theme of 'renewed professional purpose'.
4. Reviewing themes – triangulating responses from all sources to ensure they were accurately represented.
5. Defining themes – final themes were defined and linked back to research questions and literature.
6. Report – the themes were then used to structure the research findings, supported by quotes and examples.
7. Using this method makes the study easily replicable and practitioners in similar settings can follow the same steps to compare a shift in their own teaching experience.

## Results

### How do teachers perceive the shift in their role when embedding child-led learning, and how does this affect their motivation and engagement?

Teacher 2: *"I feel more empowered and confident as a teacher."*

Teacher 4: *"Renewed my passion for teaching with a more personalised and energised approach."*

Teacher 5: *"I am more engaged in what I am doing."*

### How does implementing child-led learning influence teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction in Key Stage 1?

**Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of Teacher Responses**



## **In what way does child-led learning impact teachers' professional growth?**

Teacher 2: *"I feel more empowered to innovate, experiment with new strategies and reflect on what works best for each child."*

Teacher 3: *"I feel it has improved my practices as a teacher and made teaching more enjoyable."*

Teacher 5: *"I feel more engaged and inspired, it has helped me grow as a more adaptable and responsive teacher."*

## **Discussion and Reflections**

This action research has highlighted the powerful impact of child-led learning. As teachers shifted from a directive role to that of a facilitator, they reported renewed energy, increased autonomy and greater professional fulfillment. These outcomes align with Ryan and Deci's (1985) Self Determination Theory, which emphasises autonomy, competence and relatedness as key drives of intrinsic motivation. Collaborative planning and reflection also mirrored the reflective model advocated by Rose and Rogers (2012), allowing teachers to evolve their practice through ongoing dialogue and observation.

Importantly, this study addresses the gap in the literature by focusing on the impact of child-led learning on teachers rather than just the learners, contributing new insights in the field. These findings suggest that embedding child-led learning approaches not only benefits learners but also supports teacher wellbeing and long term development.

This research has shifted both practice and perspective. I've come to see the teacher's role less as a deliverer and more as a facilitator. This shift has reduced feelings of pressure and workload, dispelling common myths that such approaches add to teacher demands. The team now sees child-led learning as a framework that enables purposeful, joyful teaching, and not as an additional task.

This research demonstrates that child-led learning benefits teachers as much as children by promoting wellbeing and increasing motivation, and it offers an encouraging perspective for schools aiming to embed child-led principles across all phases without overburdening staff.

## **Conclusion**

This action research highlights that implementing a child-led learning approach in Key Stage 1 does not increase workload but instead fosters a sense of autonomy, reduces planning pressure, and renews professional purpose. This study provides a practical framework for educators seeking to embrace child-led learning without added workload.

The findings have sparked wider conversations within our team, contributing to ongoing curriculum reviews and shaping how we design the academic year ahead to be more responsive, purposeful and child-led.

The outcomes of this project suggest that schools aiming to embed child-led learning should prioritise teacher autonomy and collaboration, and further research could explore how these positive impacts extend into later primary phases and larger teams.

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