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## **Children as researchers in English primary schools: developing a model for good practice**

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### **Background**

Since the establishment of the Children's Research Centre at The Open University (CRC) in 2004, children from the age of nine have been shown to be able to engage meaningfully with research process when given appropriate training. Since its inauguration, a number of schools have participated in CRC projects that provide research training and support children with research projects. However, to date there has been little research directed at understanding how children experience taking part in these programmes. Some initiatives appear to have been more successful than others. There is a need to understand why this is the case and no systematic evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme has previously been carried out.

### **Research Questions**

Substantial claims have been made by adults regarding process and outcome in relation to the movement towards enabling children to actively engage in research process. These claims are, however, grounded in current debate surrounding the issue of children's status in our society and in school, children's voice and participation and the effects of power in children's everyday lives and in research relationships. As such, these are adult views of what is significant or potentially problematic and have been largely unsupported by the views of children themselves since little research has been carried out in this area. This is particularly so if Children as Researchers (CaR) initiatives take place in school settings where a complex set of concepts, issues and influences appear to be particularly evident. Furthermore, given the paucity of any evidence-based literature relating to significant and problematic issues concerning CaRs in English primary schools, if children are to be recognised as social actors in their own right, and given a voice by offering the opportunities to carry out their own research projects, then it is vital that their perspectives on process, outcomes and barriers are explored.

This paper reports on the findings of a four-year doctoral study which identified and explored the issues and barriers that influence experiences of children's engagement in self-directed empirical research in these settings. By gathering together the views of children and adults who have been involved in CaR initiatives, a comprehensive account of these influential factors was constructed. Three research questions provided drivers for the study. These addressed actual and potential barriers to children's active engagement in research process in English primary schools; children's perceptions of the adult-child relationships which affected their training and activities as active researchers, and children's perceptions of the outcomes of carrying out their own research projects

### **Methods**

Multiple-case study was adopted as the research strategy for this study. Data were generated with adult and child participants in five schools associated with the CRC. Data generation followed a flexible approach which was sufficiently open-ended, reflexive and responsive to allow the exploration of both children's and adult' subjective experiences of their involvement in research groups within school settings. A flexible, multimethod research design was applied and predominantly qualitative data were generated through focus groups held with, and questionnaires distributed to, young researchers (n=47) and their peers (n=145) and through individual unstructured interviews with adults (n=14).

### **Frame**

The analysis of qualitative data generated through these methods was informed by grounded theory. A constructivist approach was adopted. This acknowledges data and analysis to be constructed from shared experiences with participants and from relationships between researcher and participants, between participants and between data. A smaller amount of quantitative data was subject to exploratory data analysis. This both complemented and informed the qualitative analyses.

### **Research findings**

The central categories which emerged from the data and, in particular, the identification of important issues by the children, have together informed the staged construction of a model for CaR initiatives in English primary schools. This illustrates the factors and processes that had an impact on both the children's experiences of research training and the research process and outcomes and demonstrates that these are inextricably interrelated. Moreover, the model suggests an inclusive framework for understanding the factors that have an impact on the success or otherwise of participatory activities in primary schools. If conditions are unfavourable, CaR initiatives which set out to empower children can, instead, leave children feeling excluded, disempowered and disengaged. It is important, therefore, that the initiatives are implemented and supported in ways which will support their success. Consideration of the issues and barriers identified will provide a basis for good practice during the further implementation and evaluation of young researcher initiatives in schools. This study addresses a gap in our knowledge and understanding of children as researchers and informs critical debate concerning children's voice and participation, adult-child power relationships and children's rights in English primary schools.