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# Extending boundaries: young people as action researchers

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## Abstract

Action research is generally undertaken by adults as a process of systematic action planning and enquiry which can lead to improvements in aspects of their professional practices. This article challenges and extends conventional understanding of action research to show how young people, between the ages of 10 and 17, can interrogate and improve their own practices – both individually and collectively. Brief accounts of four case studies – three British and one South African – are presented, along the lines of a patchwork narrative. Each ‘patch’ in turn contributes to the later collation of a theme and ideas that ‘stitch’ the studies together.

## Introduction

Action research, as most of us know it, is practised by adults – academics, researchers and professional practitioners. It generally involves a process of systematic action planning and enquiry which can lead to improvements in aspects of professional practice (see, for example, McNiff and Whitehead, 2005 and 2006). This article, however, explores innovative ways in which children and young people have begun to engage in various forms of action research. These include reflections on practice by individuals and as members of a team.

A patchwork approach (Winter, 2003) is adopted to draw together a range of experiences and ideas from four different research activities and contexts. Towards the end of the case study narratives, emerging issues relating to action research and young people are identified and discussed. It is hoped that readers will add to the patchwork by responding to and debating the issue of involving youngsters as researchers.

The first account describes how a group of Young Researchers, supported by York St John University in England, have developed understanding and skills

for the changing world, as well as creative problem-solving, questioning and analysis. The second describes how learners at a primary school in London researched and analysed the impact of their work in improving the mathematical learning of even younger pupils. The third account, from Liverpool, England describes how young learners became collaborative partners in teaching assistants' action research. The final account, from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, describes how children were able to reflect formatively on their individual and team efforts in delivering community education. From these separate case studies (or patches), we move towards a collective understanding (patchwork) of the phenomenon of young people doing research.

Although each of the research facilitators (Margaret, David, Christine and Bill) has had different research experiences and has adopted rather different styles of narrating, we share a common value. It is that of respecting the voice of the young and of recognising their creative and perceptive potential to shape and enhance learning. At the same time, we also recognise the challenges, difficulties and tensions that accompany attempts to engage young people in research.

## Breaking new ground

This article 'breaks new ground' in three significant ways relating to (1) research methodology and *reporting*, (2) research *content* and (3) its assumptions and *assertions*. Through employing the (cross-hemisphere) patchwork narrative approach described above, it departs from the conventional/customary format of academic *reporting* in which a writer presents sequentially the aims, research problems or hypotheses, data-gathering instruments, findings, research results and recommendations. Its 'pioneering' *content* explores ways in which young, school-going children have conducted action research. Furthermore, it *claims* that first-person action research can be applied by young learners – and not limited to adult practitioners.

## Discovering our shared concern

Having met at a conference in London in 2006, we four contributors discovered that we shared a common interest in encouraging young people's

voices to be heard. We each had different ideas and experiences to pool and soon the idea was born of combining these to form different threads in a patchwork narrative through which we would build up a picture of some of the different manifestations of this common interest. We all shared a commitment to practitioner enquiry within professional development.

Reflective practice is the cornerstone of practitioner enquiry and what is compiled here are summaries and reflections on our experiences of research, which puts young people at the centre. In a key respect, we are ‘crossing boundaries’ by challenging what have been normative practices in research into childhood done by adults who inevitably filter young people’s experiences and views through the lens of adult experience. We argue that, if we are committed to improving experience for young people in their learning and in other aspects of their lives, then it is important that we listen to their perspectives.

Our approach is rooted in valuing young people’s views and issues as young citizens and a desire to learn from their insights as we seek to improve and develop practice. We claim that learners’ voices represent something of a challenge to the hegemonic structures and relationships, which assume an epistemological position that can be summarised simply as ‘adults know best’.

The manner in which we have compiled and are presenting our findings also goes beyond customary policies and practices in academic reporting. The structure of the article is guided by Winter’s (2003) notion of a patchwork text since it includes a series of short sections, each representing a complete account that contributes to a later collation of themes and ideas that ‘stitch’ them together. The collating of these different accounts, the analysis and the raising of questions allows common themes to emerge and highlights differences. Although Winter (2003) focuses on the use of a patchwork text in this way as a means for students to present course work, his earlier work with others (Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska, 1999) focuses on the creative, imaginative elements, with stories and imaginative writing supporting reflective writing. For us, it is a useful way to draw together a range of ideas from different people in order to create an article for further discussion.

## Patch 1: Young people as researchers

*In this case study, Margaret describes the initiative and the nature of her involvement:*

The plan to develop Young Researchers at York St John University was inspired by the work of Mary Kellett (2005) and the Children's Research Centre based at the Open University. The Young Researchers training enabled young people to develop knowledge of the research process and the skills and capabilities to plan, design and carry out their own small-scale research projects. Some of these were team projects, others conducted in pairs or individually.

The initiative was developed with young people from ten to seventeen years of age, in two principal ways: a Young Researchers training programme, offered through the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), held at York St John University over six Saturday morning sessions; and research training sessions with teachers in other primary and secondary schools so that they in turn can train their young researchers and so take this work forward. The development of this work in schools has been supported with inputs and guidance at key moments as the young researchers' work has progressed. These have been at points, for example, where help is needed with framing the research questions, analysing data, writing up and presenting findings.

There are different possible models of engagement. For example, Young Researchers' work can form part of a curricular or cross-curricular topic, or it may be offered as an extra-curricular after school 'club'. There have been two dissemination events at the University where the Young Researchers have given PowerPoint presentations of their research to invited adult audiences of University staff, parents, Local Authority partners and teachers.

The second of these was a University Research Conference at which some of the MA students on the practitioner enquiry-based MA in Educational Improvement, Development and Change also presented their research, sharing the same platform as the Young Researchers and the invited keynote speaker. This modelled good practice in terms of schools as learning organisations for, on the same conference programme were teachers presenting their classroom-based, small-scale practitioner enquiries and also young people presenting their research studies.

*Margaret explains key achievements and the importance of the initiative:*

The learning for the young people has been powerful and we have learnt a great deal ourselves too. The young people have clearly gained in confidence and presented their research to adult audiences with skill and expert ability. As their conference presentations and research reports have demonstrated, they began to use the language and vocabulary of the researcher and this has been underpinned by a knowledge and understanding of the concepts behind the words. They have offered explanations of, and justifications for, their methods of data collection and have learnt the importance of aligning a well-framed research question to their data collection methods. They have learnt how to make sense of data and to make sure conclusions reached are supported by the data. More generally, they have learnt the importance of being well-organised, systematic and methodical in planning their projects and collecting, analysing and interpreting the data. We have been impressed by the disciplined effort and commitment of our Young Researchers. Comments from the conference audience showed that the Young Researchers work had impressed them too.

The Young Researchers work exemplifies the values-driven approach discussed above. These values are centred on a belief in the importance of listening to what young people have to say through their own empirical studies into matters and issues that are significant to them. The work has made an important contribution to learning as the young people have been enabled to research issues (see examples below) through a rigorous process of enquiry. Our motivations and concerns have stemmed from our commitment to student voice. As far as possible, the aim has been to help the students' voices be heard, not through engaging young people in research designed by adults, but through the students speaking for themselves.

The contribution to young people's learning through the Young Researchers training has been impressive. What have these learning gains been? They have developed interpersonal skills as they have worked collaboratively with other young researchers in designing their projects and critiquing one another's ideas. They have learnt a great deal about asking questions. Their projects began from their carefully framed research questions and they learnt about how to ask meaningful questions of their respondents which were not value-laden, biased, assumptive or leading. They have learnt to make sense of the data they have collected and to report what they have found out. They have had an opportunity to develop creative project work, to develop their ICT skills as they presented their data for example in pie charts, spreadsheets, graphs and bar charts. They have applied critical thinking and problem-solving

skills in their investigations. A key point to note is that they have experienced enjoyment from this learning. Student evaluations have identified learning benefits, including:

. . . to think independently; to criticise my own and others' work; to gain 'valuable skills'. It has made me 'think about research techniques and taught me a lot more about the implications of research'; 'taught me to better manage my time. . .' and developed the skills of 'collecting and analysing data'.

Some of the research projects undertaken by the group of secondary phase young researchers have included:

- School Dinners: a small scale investigation;
- What are the views of 10–12 year olds on local facilities?
- How instrumentalists relate to their instruments;
- Why Young People attend NAGTY Outreach courses and the benefits;
- What are pupils' opinions about the sport offered in school?
- What considerations are taken into account when devising a secondary school menu?
- Is peer pressure different for boys and girls?
- Is there a link between church attendance and age or church attendance and gender?

*Finally, Margaret reflects on the experiences thus far:*

The Young People as Researchers work is still at an early stage and whilst we have learnt a great deal from our experiences so far, we are also committed to developing our work further. In terms of embedding the knowledge and skills in schools so that this can be sustained in the longer term, we hope that we can work with teachers to give them the confidence and expertise to continue this work and that the young people themselves can become expert 'research consultants' who train other young people to become young researchers.

Some important points have emerged from our reflections on our experiences of working with Young Researchers. Firstly, we have become convinced of the value and benefits of this work for young people's learning. One example would be the opportunities we built into the programme for them to critique aspects of one another's research design through which they learnt to ask questions of one another's thinking, to give feedback, to suggest alternatives and to problem-solve together. We believe from their presentations and reports that this process helped them to become more self-critical and questioning and

able to identify both strengths and weaknesses in many aspects of their own research design. Many valuable and transferable skills have been learnt through this.

We have also reflected on the tremendous energy, ‘buzz’ and exhilaration that this work generated. The students have engaged well, have been committed to the work and ‘on task’, and they have had fun. How has this been achieved? The active methodology, the pace of learning, the high levels of ‘ownership’ of projects they design and carry out themselves may all have contributed to this. Their research has been affirmed through presentations to peers and adults who have been eager to listen and learn.

Throughout our work we have been inspired and sustained by the work of Mary Kellett (2005) and the Children’s Research Centre based at the Open University. We have drawn on this work, learnt from it and applied the thinking to the development of our own Young Researchers work. The [Children’s Research Centre website can be accessed at http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk/](http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk/)

We have reflected on the potential of this work to re-engage some of those who may be disengaged from schooling and so perhaps to contribute in some way to educational inclusion. A possibility for future development, which we have explored briefly with one secondary school, is to make this work accessible and attractive to students who are difficult to engage and motivate and who may benefit from having a constructive outlet for their views and perceptions which would also provide an important learning experience for them. This is a possible future direction for our Young Researchers work and perhaps the next challenge and development.

## Patch 2: Young Londoners (10-12yrs) research improving mathematical learning of younger pupils

*David introduces the primary school mathematical project, and how he came to be involved:*

My school became involved in a Mathematics and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Primary Network with five other schools in the London Borough of Hounslow. The focus of the network was to explore the potential of ICT and the Interactive Whiteboards in order to enhance the teaching and the learning of Mathematics. An interactive whiteboard is touch-



sensitive and allows teachers and children to participate interactively and collaboratively in activities which are projected onto it from a data projector connected to a computer.

The network was funded by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England for a period of twelve months. The group from our school that attended the network meetings comprised the principal, ICT co-ordinator and a teacher researcher. In addition to sharing good teaching practice, each school had to investigate ways of improving the teaching of aspects of a subject. Four of the five schools were interested in improving under-achievement in mathematics by using the gifted and talented pupils to assist the underachievers in their learning. Each school used different year groups depending on their own area of improvement.

The funding they received allowed the network group to resource their borough's Gifted and Talented (GT) advisor, a consultant who supports schools with the teaching and learning of gifted and talented pupils, and whose role is to help and support the chosen 'Gifted and Talented' pupils in coaching and mentoring Year 1 pupils. The pupils in our school were selected based on the results of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), a compulsory government test at age 7, and also on the teacher's end of year assessments. In addition, the advisor's role was to develop pupil researchers to examine whether this project has benefited the learning and enjoyment of the year 1 pupils in mathematics.

I entered the school as a student in the final year of my initial teacher training programme to carry out research in the area of mathematics. I was offered part-time work teaching in the school and soon became aware of this school initiative. As I was interested in carrying out my MA research in the school, it was decided after discussions that I should evaluate the project and investigate ways to improve it in the following year. Currently, therefore, I am a newly qualified teacher (NQT) at the school and part of the team planning the next stage of development for the project.

The school identified a history of underachievement in Year 1 mathematics over a five year period. From the baseline results at the end of Reception, we identified twelve children in Year 1 who needed extra support. A corresponding number of GT children from Years 4/5 were identified using criteria mentioned above to support the Year 1 pupils. A lunchtime club was set up in the school each Wednesday in the ICT suite. The Year 1s and their



‘buddies’ played mathematical games on the computers. The term ‘buddy’ used here refers to the GT pupils who support the Year 1s.

Our buddy system allowed underachieving Year 1 pupils to have one-to-one support from the GT pupils. This meant that when problems or misconceptions were encountered, the Year 1 pupils were able to work through these together with their buddy. The GT pupils were supported by the GT advisor on how best to support the Year 1s and how to keep a diary of their involvement with them. The sessions were supervised by a member of staff at all times. Three of the GT pupils were selected to carry out action research to evaluate the learning and enjoyment of the Year 1 pupils. These pupils were referred to as ASPs (Advanced Skills Pupils). Along with pupils from the other schools involved in the network, they were taught how to carry out research by the GT advisor and were supported by the individual school members.

*David reflects on the outcomes and lessons learnt:*

The research conducted by the ASPs demonstrated that the Year 1 pupils really enjoyed working with their buddies and it showed that not only did they enjoy mathematics, but some even rated it more highly than Physical Education (PE). My evaluation confirmed that pupils have clearly improved in their mathematical development over the past twelve months. There is evidence that the ASPs have “developed creativity, critical thinking and analytical capability” (Kellest, 2005, p.1). They devised a research tool, a questionnaire, piloted it and were able to collect and analyse the data from it. They used Microsoft Excel to record and present their results. They then created a PowerPoint presentation where they disseminated their findings to other schools in the network and others in the borough.

What has been learnt? For me, this has been an illuminating experience. It has been a pleasure to see the enjoyment that all pupils involved have gained from this experience. They have come away from this with a new appreciation of what happens in teaching and learning. The initiative has grown into a fruitful venture and has sparked interest with other colleagues at the school. Furthermore it is in keeping with current UK education policy:

The 2002 Education Act requires schools to consult with pupils, whilst OfSTED [the Office for Standards in Education] expects inspectors to report on how far a school “seeks, values and acts on pupils’ views” (Fielding and Bragg, 2003, p.5).

Similarly, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) urges teachers to:

recognise children and young people as major stakeholders in society with important contributions to make to the design and delivery of services they receive, including education (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p.3).

Looking ahead, the next step is to evaluate the process and to develop it into a sustainable project that grows into the culture of our school. By doing this we hope to give expression to Senge's (1990) idea of the 'learning organisation' where schools can identify their own issues and priorities and so become self-evaluating and self-directing.

### Patch 3 from Liverpool: young learners (3-16yrs) as collaborative action researchers

*Christine sets the scene for inquiring into practice:*

Teaching assistants who support children and young people in educational settings undertook action research to improve their practice. I encouraged them to involve the young people in their care as full collaborative partners in their action research, with a specific focus on identifying aspects for professional development and changing their practice. The students expressed concern at focusing on their own practice and in particular, involving their learners in making comment about their performance. We used Somekh's (2006) methodological principles to guide our ethical consideration of the young peoples' roles. The balance between giving children a voice through active participation and that of facilitating the process is complex (Nieuwenhuys, 2004) and such participation might alter future adult-child relationships in unpredictable ways. However, the students' reported positive effects of involving learners, such as improved relationships and behaviour management. The children generally appeared to value the opportunity to offer insights and in one case, the teaching assistant found that the students had perceptive understanding of classroom adult relationships of which she was previously unaware.

Another concern raised by students was the notion of subjectivity. Action research methodologies are often social activities, conducted in a subjective social context. The students and I debated the benefits of using the children's personal thoughts about a teaching assistant's practice. A benefit is that the learners' thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values, inform practice. We acknowledged that much courage is required for an adult to encourage such openness since learners might present a picture of the adult's behaviour that the adult did not expect. It could be an emotional experience.

*Christine's learners participate in research for professional improvement:*

Ethically, if learners are part of collaborative action research methodology then they should be full consenting participants. They should understand why the research is taking place and understand their part in it (Alderson, 2004; Somekh, 2006). Their parents should give permission and everyone involved in the setting should understand the purpose of the inquiry e.g. to improve behaviour management skills. The learners' voices are important. By seeking their opinions, ideas, understandings and perceptions, we can reflect on our practice more effectively than we can alone or with other adults in the situation. Learners' perspectives provide options that we might never consider. Cathy's story (below) illustrates this when the children's comments inform her change of practice. She valued knowing their side of the 'truth', and seeing the learning interaction from their perspective. Names are fictionalised to protect participants' identities and relevant permissions have been sought to use this material for educational research reporting.

Cathy's story:

I worked with five boys, aged three, to explore the way I respond to their learning preferences. I identified that the all female staff often curtailed boys' learning activity by setting boundaries on how, where and what they might play. The boys knew the purpose of the research and engaged in taking photographs of things they like and dislike in the nursery as they undertook individual photographic 'tours of action'. I followed Roberts-Holmes' (2005) notion that children are experts in their own world. The children set their own agenda and decided what to photograph. They sought permission from others as they walked around. I made notes in my reflective diary and found that the boys expressed contradictory opinions on their preferences. For example, they took pictures of each other playing in the sand and water room, which they all previously said they did not like, but now made positive comments about it. Peer pressure to enjoy particular male-orientated toys might be one reason for the initial expressions of dislike. Over the two weeks, I recognised the need to take time in observing the boys play before intervening and recognised that I held stereotypical views of boys' preferences and of the boundaries that should be set.

Through the 'tour of action', Cathy learned that her behaviour had to change if she was to meet these boys' needs more effectively. Without their active participation, she might never have reached this understanding of her practice.

*However, Christine warns of challenges for practitioners when involving learners:*

One might question the extent to which the boys in Cathy's research really understood the purpose. I doubt they viewed themselves as 'researchers' but perhaps enjoyed having an opportunity to express their preferences. Using such a method the learners might produce materials that they think the adult

wants to see. In addition, the adult might re-interpret the situation represented by the photos and the observations, a danger in any research that relies on collection of primary qualitative data. Langston, Abbott, Lewis and Kellett (2004) emphasise the need for developing appropriate research methodologies when working with young children but acknowledge that there are no easy solutions to ensuring we give young learners a voice.

Despite the various ethical and methodological challenges we face in involving children and giving them voice, I remain firmly committed to securing their involvement and encouraging practitioners to learn from what their learners have to say, while continuing to address the challenges.

### Patch 4: South African youngsters (12-13yrs) improve their school's community service

This account focuses on a group of young learners at a primary school in Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Each week the group of about fifteen children met voluntarily to plan and participate in various community outreach activities. This case study recounts how, through engaging in action planning and critical self-reflection, the young learners were able to improve the quality of their individual contributions as well the effectiveness of their whole team's approach to community outreach.

*Bill explains the initiative and the nature of his involvement:*

During the year, the community service group (c.s. group) undertook a range of activities under the supervision and guidance of two Foundation Phase (Year 2) teachers. Weekly school-based meetings were alternated with weekly site visits to places of need. In this way, the children were able to make/cook/collect or prepare things at school on one afternoon each week, The following week, these home-made 'gifts' would be taken to less fortunate children (sick, vulnerable, abused or orphaned) or to frail, neglected or lonely elderly people living in institutions. The teachers-in-charge believed that the young learners benefited from interacting with less fortunate members of society, including the unemployed, poor and the dying. Furthermore, the children learnt, and put to good use, daily practical skills.

Our case study examines the c.s. group addressing the issue of *animal abuse*, particularly in communities where *human abuse* is often experienced. The probability of a close correlation between human and animal abuse had been

brought to the attention of the group by a visiting speaker, who had referred to various research studies such as Ascione, 1998; Bell, 2001; and Mertz-Perez, Heide and Silverman, 2001. The c.s. group took responsibility for 'researching' the issue of animal care and abuse and to prepare short talks, supported by posters with photographs. These talks were to be recorded for showing in some local institutions where there was a strong likelihood that children had themselves experienced or witnessed abuse. It was at this point that I was requested to make a video-recording of their prepared presentations, with a view to screening this during the fortnightly site visits to places of Shelter. The title given to their combined presentations was 'Dare to Care'.

*He reflects on the event as follows:*

The video-recording of 12 researched talks demonstrated that the children had taken much trouble over collecting material. However, I had concerns about the quality of their individual performances and reservations about the general approach of the group. I also felt uncomfortable that my filming of the talks was proving to be traumatic for the children – an impression that was confirmed in subsequent feedback.

*Improving individual practice as presenters:*

The young learners' indicated orally (and later in writing) strong negative reactions to this first-ever experience of being filmed making a presentation. The following week, the group visited the S.O.S. Children's Village to learn about life there, and to present the 'Dare to Care' video-recording. After seeing themselves in the recorded presentations, the young learners expressed highly critical self-evaluations of their individual performances. It was decided that, before the next scheduled visits to an institution for abused and neglected children, time would be spent improving their presentations through re-filming.

At the next school-based meeting, the children considered what makes for effective communication, then re-viewed and evaluated the video-recordings, concentrating on the positive aspects of individual performances. This had to be handled sensitively as the need to establish trust and respect amongst critical friends is crucial when working collaboratively (Koshy, 2005). Thereafter, each small team of presenters re-recorded their individual performances in front of the posters. The learners were generally more relaxed and positive in this recording session and, when the time came for viewing and evaluating the presentations made during subsequent visits, the self-

evaluations proved to be more balanced, appropriate and insightful. In the opinion of both teachers and an accompanying visiting student, an overall marked improvement in communication was noted. This was attributed more to the reflective process of self- and peer-evaluation than to the passage of time and growth in individual confidence.

Evidence for making such judgements was triangulated from a variety of sources (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005). It included ratings and comments recorded in writing by the teachers who monitored the first and second performances of the presenting children. More detailed evidence was obtained later when juxtaposed videotaped recordings of individual children were evaluated and compared by two 'outside observers'. This experience helped me realise why the use of video recordings for such evaluative purposes is increasingly popular amongst professional practitioners (Koshy, 2005) and that it can readily be employed by young children with a view to improving their own practices.

And what of the overall approach adopted by the team? To what extent was this also influenced by the action research and participation of the young learners?

*Improving the team's approach:*

Clearly there was some dissatisfaction amongst the young learners and me regarding the effectiveness of the site visits. One-way 'delivery' of community service was neither educationally healthy nor mutually beneficial. In the course of the group's critical self-reflection, the need to have enjoyable, two-way interaction with the various 'beneficiaries' was identified and emphasised. However, it was acknowledged that time constraints during the afternoon visits generally prevented this kind of interaction.

In the review and reflection process, and inspired by recent reading of McNiff and Whitehead (2006), I posed the question 'How can we improve our approach as a team?' This question served to "involve the learners in the research process as full participants" (Moustakim, 2007, p.218). It elicited a range of creative ideas and innovative approaches that were debated and agreed upon by the group as a whole. As such, it proved to be a fruitful exercise in which the adult educator's concerns connected with the learners' efforts in interrogating and improving practice.

It was decided jointly that a modified approach would be adopted during



future site visits. For example, immediately after the one-way video-presentation, the young learners would go outside with small groups of children and rehearse singing a specially-composed Animal Rap, which contained the essential messages of the presentation. Immediately thereafter, the children from the Homes would perform the Rap for the c.s. group – which would be filmed and played back for viewing!

This was carried out during subsequent site visits, resulting in enjoyment and laughter, as well as enhanced interaction with the children from the various Homes and Shelters. The c.s. group recorded more positive reflections on their experiences, and the adult educators agreed there had been improved learning, particularly in that the key messages had been heard with enjoyment numerous times – and would probably live on in the rap-song that took on a life of its own in the children's homes.

*Bill reflects on the significance of the work:*

In a modest way, and within limited contact time, we saw the potential of young learners to become action researchers. Arising out of their initial unsatisfactory experiences as 'presenters', the young learners were motivated to discover what makes for effective communication – and then applied these new insights in improving their own 'practice'. Through facilitated self- and peer-evaluation of the video-recordings, the young learners quickly identified communication strategies that made their re-recordings more effective and enjoyable.

Prompted by an initial adult probing question (How can we improve our site visits?) the young learners became central in adjusting the way subsequent institutional visits were conducted. The resultant enhanced interaction with children at the centres, and the consolidation of key messages through children learning the Animal Rap, were indicators that the quality of community service had indeed benefited from the active participation of the young learners.

## From patches to patchwork

The four case studies described in this article have demonstrated a variety of ways in which groups of young learners, in the UK and South Africa, have engaged in research. Each patch above has emphasised a different aspect of action research:



- Children researching their own interests (Margaret's Patch 1);
- Children reflecting on and evaluating their performance in supporting younger learners (David's Patch 2);
- Children as collaborators in teaching assistants' action research projects. (Christine's Patch 3);
- Children becoming action researchers to improve their performance (Bill's Patch 4)

The motivation for the involvement of young people in research has traditionally tended to emanate from adults with a common belief in listening to what young people have to say and in equipping young people with the broad range of skills needed in society. However, in framing the research questions there are clear differences, with some young researchers encouraged to follow their own interests after being equipped with the necessary research skills while others are collaborators with an adult taking the greater responsibility for the project. In both approaches young learners have an opportunity to express their thoughts but we might question which extreme is better, complete self-motivated inquiry or adult-led collaboration. In which situation do we hear their voices more effectively and for what purpose? Jones (2004) suggests that in all situations where young people become involved in research, they are subordinate in some way to the adults who guide them and questions whether democratisation is possible. He suggests that adults must reflect on their behaviour, values and role before involving children and as the research unfolds. We agree that we must reflect on the best interests of the young people in order to avoid exploitation or coercion.

Those involved should recognise that there are 'real' and 'perceived' boundaries within which people are operating. For example, the researching children may perceive their role as being 'real work taking place in a positive environment'. Jones (2004) warns that children can become over-involved in the research and in their particular way of viewing it – just as adults can do – and this can prevent them from separating out the issues. Jones appears to favour an approach in which the children are involved in all aspects of the research from design through to dissemination – and this is where our **Patches 1 and 2** fit together. Both the Young Researchers in York and at the London primary school engaged in all stages of the research process. The experience of working with the Young Researchers in York (**Patch 1**) has demonstrated the potentially significant contribution that can be made to student learning. This learning is transferable across the curriculum and is valuable too as

learning for adulthood. For example, Abbott (1994, p.25) has argued that education for the changing world of the future needs to develop learner confidence and a capacity to think for oneself:

To be able to write and do sums; to turn up on time; to do as one is told; and to accept that someone else is planning the process and one's own part within it, may have been an adequate definition of education for a manufacturing economy, but it no longer holds as a basis for a changing economy. It certainly gives individuals no confidence. . .

It is those individuals and societies who have 'learnt to think things out for themselves', and who are able to perceive new patterns of emerging connections and whose thinking is not tied to a previous narrow perspective, who can feel most positive about the future. Such people 'think about thinking'; they are reflective and critical of what they see around them, which others merely take for granted. Simply, they are questioning people.

In becoming researchers, young people are often empowered to become more self-critical. They learn to ask questions of their own work with a view to strengthening and improving it and not being satisfied with their first ideas or attempts.

Kellett (2005, p.2) suggests that:

Learning is about acquiring, understanding and applying knowledge but it is also about using those skills to create knowledge. Pupils rarely get an opportunity to *create* their own original knowledge in schools.

She points out that through the research process, young people become the creators of original knowledge. The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999) has suggested that features of the creative endeavour are *action* and *purpose*. By way of demonstration, our Young Researchers have been actively involved in the purposeful design of their research projects which have been the means by which they have 'created their own original knowledge'.

The London primary school in **Patch 2** successfully introduced three pupils to action research techniques. The pupils have used these skills to evaluate the quality of the educational programme they were providing for underachieving Year 1 pupils in mathematics. The three ASPs found that what they had provided did help to improve the enjoyment and learning of the pupils involved. Furthermore, their investigation begged further questions of them about the ways in which this programme could be improved. This has opened their eyes to teaching, learning and action research. Likewise our own eyes have been opened to their individual ways of thinking on the praxis of action-reflection-action. It is the hope within the school to create a snowball effect

that will develop each year as the number of pupils involved in this and other projects increases.

What do we learn from the two other case studies: **Patches 3 and 4**? The former described how teaching assistants sought to improve their professional practice through involving learners as active explorers of that practice; the latter examined how young presenters, unhappy with their own performances as individuals and a team, worked with the guidance of an adult to improve their performance.

In **Patch 3**, the teaching assistants tried to actively involve learners as collaborators in exploring and improving their own professional practice. What issues arise? In the reported case, the learners had not chosen the focus, but were drawn into it by the adult sharing her identified focus. Perhaps we should build opportunity for learners to help us identify areas for professional development? This might lead to adults feeling vulnerable particularly when they are used to being in a position of authority and power. It might challenge the whole ethos of the setting in which the research takes place and a teaching assistant is not often in the position of being able to do this without some form of redress. In addition, the learners were minimally involved in exploring all the data and reflecting on possible solutions. None was involved in dissemination, except that some teaching assistants did check with the learners that their interpretations were as the learners viewed situations and they shared a modified version of their final report orally or written at the learners' level. Further work remains to support democratising of the process.

In **Patch 4**, the young South African learners played an important part in developing their own presentations and enhancing peer learning. Furthermore, the group community service activities in which they were collectively engaged were modified and improved through the young people evaluating their own practices. Adults had a role to play but essentially the improvement strategies came from the young people themselves, through review and reflection on their teamwork and outcomes.

Further challenges remain in establishing how effectively, if at all, schools can introduce children to action research, without the catalytic presence of an outsider. Moreover, how realistic is it to expect teachers and learners to engage in action planning and enquiry in the face of mounting curriculum and continuous assessment demands? Certainly, appropriate training, material and moral support needs to be provided by relevant bodies and personnel if there are ever to be sustained action research initiatives.

## Conclusion

Insights from the above case studies have encouraged us to explore further ways of engaging young learners in various forms of action research. In sharing our experiences through a patchwork narrative we have become increasingly convinced of the considerable potential for learning gains. All four studies went beyond the boundaries of many action research projects by involving and supporting groups of young learners through the required processes.

On the other hand, and at the same time, the studies have alerted us to fundamental tensions inherent in conducting work of this nature. For example, there is clearly a tension between giving the pupils autonomy while at the same time supporting them and arguably improving the outcomes. There is also a temptation for adults to take control of a project, to direct and be in charge. However, we agree that ways should be found to ensure that the drive to research should as far as possible emanate from the ‘youthful’ end of the continuum. Children and young people should be given as much control as possible – depending on age and maturity of course. By so doing the discourse and activities become empowering and provide opportunities for development that is truly learner-centred.

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## Note

This article is a collective submission which grew out of our informal meeting as delegates at a BERA Practitioner Research Conference held in London in July 2006.

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