'So how well did it really go'? Working with primary school pupils as project evaluators: A case study

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Abstract
This paper reports on a productive partnership between a University's research unit and one local primary school, which is part of a bigger project, 'Pupils as Research Partners in Primary (PARPP), which generally seeks to actively involve children as researchers in child-led research in a variety of school-based research initiatives. The paper describes and discusses a case study of 5-11 year-old pupils working as researchers. It focuses on how the project gave them the opportunity to design and lead on the evaluation of a major, externally funded exhibition hosted by the school. This experience had a beneficial effect on the pupils who enhanced their confidence and communication skills as well as learning about research processes. It influenced how their school approached future externally-funded projects, and encouraged their teachers to think about using more child-led research as part of their everyday practice. Lastly, it consolidated a new, research-based relationship between the school and a local university.

Keywords
Child-led research; primary school and university-based research partnerships.

Introduction: Pupil-led research in schools
Children's rights were enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Of particular relevance to this paper were Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC which required that children should be informed, involved and consulted about all decisions that affect their lives. The idea that children can and should be active researchers into their own lives and experiences is an idea that has grown out of these wider rights accorded to children and their views in society, especially in Western culture (James and Prout 2015; Hallett and Prout, 2003; Alderson and Morrow, 2004). This cultural shift in attitude towards children has encouraged adults to see that children are individuals in their own right not just junior members, subject to social organisations such their family or school that are ostensibly controlled by the adults in their lives (Corsaro, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Alderson, 2000; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Taylor, 2002).

In UK schools this shift towards children's rights manifested itself in policy initiatives such as Every Child Matters (DCSF 2003) and the subsequent Children's Act (2004), which encouraged schools to increase pupil participation in matters relating to children's education and experiences in school (Hill, 1997; Pinkerton, 2004). Drawing on an extensive body of work into child-centred research (Kellett, Forrest, Dent and Ward, 2004; Kellett 2005; Clark and Moss 2005; Clark 2004) the study described in this paper recognised from the outset that a barrier to children engaging in research is their perceived lack of research knowledge and skills, and inevitably the unequal balance of power between children and adults engaged in research together. However, there is a growing, emerging academic field in Childhood Studies that emphasises children's agency and repositions them as active researchers into their lives, experiences and opinions *as children* (Christensen and James,

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2008), as well as participants in research about children (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000). For example, The Open University's Children's Research Centre (http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/childrens-research-centre/crc-projects/wecan2 , no date) was created to support and promote research by children in the UK and in many universities. Pioneering emancipatory research practices have developed out of work in Childhood Studies and Early Years departments (Greene and Hill, 2005).

These changes in social attitudes to children means that, as part of research studies they have been elected onto project steering groups, helped write project briefs as well as being actively encouraged to take part in data collection, often through the use of digital technologies such as video and Facebook (Kerawalla, 2014 a and b). These studies illustrate the extent to which the experience of participating as active researchers in child-led research often leads to increased self-confidence around problem solving and decision-making as well as raised self-esteem and a greater assurance about working with adults for the children involved. This paper argues that pupils' co-participation in school-based research processes heightens teachers' awareness of how pupils could, and perhaps should, be involved in decisions that affect their lives in school (and beyond). Such involvement could include working collaboratively on issues arising about the school environment, teaching practices or pupil behaviour (Bucknall, 2012).

The case study described in this paper is part of the Pupil as Research Partners in Primary (PARPP) project, which is a school and university based partnership that co-creates pupil-led research opportunities and activities for pupils and teachers in research projects informed by pupils' experiences in primary school. Regionally PARPP aims to encourage a research community network for schools working already working in partnership with the university through its teacher training and postgraduate programmes. The university, which has a growing reputation for innovation and excellence in child-led research, regards PARPP as an exciting way to enhance and promote their existing work in this area.

The case study: Evaluating a school exhibition
In this paper we focus on how this PARPP project gave pupils aged 5-11 the opportunity to design and lead on the evaluation of a major, externally funded exhibition hosted by their primary school. The Higher Teaching and Learning Assistant (HTLA) responsible for the bid described the origins of the exhibition thus:

> Whilst working as a HTLA in the research setting I was successful in winning a National Lottery bid for ten thousand pounds as part of their push to commemorate the Great War. The decision was made to create and curate a First World War exhibition drawing on artefacts and memories for the local community, plus art work undertaken by the pupils   working with a number of with teachers and local artists. The art work produced for the WW1 exhibition would eventually be permanently displayed in the school hall as part of another time-line project. The project took place over a week at the beginning of the summer holidays. Children signed up and word spread quickly and the original fourteen children we had on the Monday steadily rose, so that by Friday there were thirty children.

The development of the artwork and the mounting of the exhibition was a major undertaking involving most of the pupils, many teachers, and a number of visiting artists to the school. Importantly the principle of involving pupils as much as possible as equals in the creative process had already been established.

> I wanted the children to create the boards but recognised they would need to find out more about the subject. So to begin each section of the time-line theme the children did some

research in the ICT suite. This allowed them to come up with the ideas about what they
wanted to create. The emphasis was on discussion and collaboration with the pupils at all
stages as the work began to take shape day by day over the course of the project. At the end
of each session everybody shared what they had made. The floor was given over to the
children so they could say what they had done, how they had created their piece and what
they had used. This process empowered the pupils giving them a voice and control over what
they had been doing.

This commitment to giving the pupils a voice and helping them feel in control of their contributions
meant that they already felt a strong sense of ownership about the exhibition. Involving them in the
evaluation was the next logical step.

There are many reasons why one might want to evaluate such an event in school where teachers
and pupils have expended time, energy and money. With regard to externally funded projects
moreover, there is usually a need to ascertain if the funded event has met the aims and objectives
that had originally initiated the bid. In this instance, the primary motivation for an evaluation came
from the HTLA who had written the successful bid and organised the exhibition. She was as keen to
engage pupils in the evaluation of the exhibition, as she had been to involve them fully in its actual
creation. On a practical level, she wanted to gauge the responses and experiences of visitors on the
day of exhibition, and looking ahead, she also wanted to use the evaluation to explore how the
experience of this event, for staff and pupils alike, could positively inform the planning for future
projects and possible external funding bids.

Importantly, as outlined above, all the pupils contributed to the exhibition and were, therefore, very
familiar with the exhibition's aims and objectives, which helped inform their role as its evaluators.
Working with pupils had a significant impact on how the evaluation evolved and the shape it
eventually took. For example, each aspect or stage of the process demanded a focus on safe,
inclusive and ethical ways of working which ensured that the pupils involved were able to express
their views and fully participate in the processes of planning and carrying out the evaluation. With
that in mind adult participation in this, as in other PARPP projects, was always handled carefully to
maximise the children's sense of ownership and agency.

Methodology
To kick start the involvement of the pupils in the evaluation process we adopted a broadly
constructivist approach as described by sociocultural theorists working in the educational and early
years such as Vygotsky (1962) and later Bruner (1986) who both insist that learning is fundamentally
a social activity. Children, like adults, develop understanding and construct knowledge, not only
from direct personal experience, but from their interaction with others. In a constructivist paradigm,
research is carried out as a social, collaborative activity with and by children, not on them (Cohen,
Manion and Morrison, 2000). For this study, a commitment to children as active learners, always
engaged in making meaning, testing out theories and trying to make sense of the world for
themselves was at the heart of its constructivist research paradigm. The focus of PARPP is to co-
construct with pupils in primary school settings, meaningful research activities that are informed by,
and can impact on their everyday lives in school. Accordingly, the PARPP researcher initiated a
working group for the evaluation project with an established group of pupils already operating in the
school, namely the School Council. School Councils, one can argue, provide a 'third space' for pupil-
led activities to take place in school settings. Third space theory (Oldenburg, 2000) is generally
concerned with ideas of hybridity and 'in-betweenness'. In this project the, the HTLA, in her role as
cross-school club co-ordinator, was a kind of hybrid as she occupied an in-between 'third space', she
was not a teacher, nor was she a classroom- based teaching assistant (TA), rather her role embraced
aspects both of a teaching and TA role but she actually operated in the school as something very

different. The university-based PARPP researcher, who worked directly with the pupils on the evaluation, similarly had a role outside the school and so was not associated in the pupils' minds as a teacher although she clearly shared some attributes of a teacher. The freedom that these third, or in-between spaces, offered the evaluation project was important as it helped break down, or at least minimise, the traditional power-imbalance in schools between adults/teachers and children/pupils that often inhibits child-led research initiatives (Kellett, 2004). On a practical level, the School Council spanned all the years of the school and its members had already buddied up to help each other carry out various tasks as part of their Council role. For the evaluation development session, the pupils self-selected into multi-aged groups so that the older members could facilitate the contributions of the younger ones by, for example, writing down their ideas when they were not able to do it for themselves.   The PARPP researcher made clear from the outset that the children's ideas and opinions were crucial to the evaluation process, which was in turn going to be very helpful for any future exhibitions that the school might want to put on. Specifically, she stressed that they, the pupils, were in charge of the process of developing and collecting information about the exhibition through the evaluation.

Ethical issues

There are many ethical issues relating to children as co-researchers, as outlined by Alderson and Morrow (2004), which PARPP sought to address. Specifically, Kellett (2005) warns how even well-meaning adult 'support' can 'hi-jack' research processes giving them a 'steer' which children may find difficult to challenge or resist. Although it is difficult to claim that child-led research can ever be entirely free of adult influence and/or control, in this project we were careful to protect the children's involvement in the project from any kind of take-over by teachers.   It was agreed in advance that teachers were not to seek to manage or control the children's contributions and discussions and the pupils were explicitly told that the teachers were just observing the session and would not get involved with the Q&A sessions with the researcher. Interestingly, the pupils did tend to ignore the teachers, and even where younger children struggled to express their views they generally asked one of the older children in the group for help rather than any of the adults in the room.

However, for safeguarding purposes at least one teacher was always in the room with the PARPP researcher and it was anticipated, for at least for the first session, that a familiar face in the room would help settle and reassure the children about working on the project. As well as observing standard ethical guidelines, such as telling the pupils they could say if they did not want to take part in the activities at any time, the PARPP researcher also sought to explore ethical principles about the evaluation with the pupils.   This was very easy to do as from the outset it was obvious that the children had strong ethical scruples and showed great sensitivity towards the people they would be questioning for the evaluation. For example, they were very clear that their preamble for the evaluation survey should make clear why they were conducting the evaluation. They also agreed that people could refuse to take part in the survey and that they did not have to answer all the questions if they did not want to.

Research activities

As the PARPP project meetings were part of the time allocated for other School Council activities, and because it was important that the children did not get bored or restless, it was agreed that the sessions about the evaluation should be about half an hour to forty-five minutes long, so that there was enough time to have meaningful discussions with the pupils. In the first session it was important to ensure that everyone had a shared understanding of the process and purpose of the evaluation. For this reason, the university PARPP researcher asked the children a series of questions designed to explore and then create a shared understanding about some key research concepts and principles. For example, the pupils discussed what universities were for and did they know anyone who had

been to one and what being a researcher at university might involve. Without difficulty or dissent the children quickly established that research was something to do with '*finding things out*', '*asking questions*' and '*talking to people about what they think'.*

They were then invited to discuss what evaluation meant and why they might want to evaluate the exhibition that they had all been working on so hard. Again they were very quick to grasp the idea of evaluation, for example, '*We might want to know which bits they liked best*', '*it will tell us who has come to see the exhibition' and 'it will help us to decide what kind of exhibition to do next*'. They next discussed how they might collect the data through a series of open questions such as: 'How might you find the information needed for the evaluation?', 'When and where should you ask people the questions that you want to ask?' and' How can you record the information that they give you?" After plenty of lively discussion between group members, they finally chose a 'visitor exit survey' as their methodology of data collection. This kind of evaluation activity does not only record how many people and what kind of people attended the event, it can also enumerate their different experiences of and opinions about the event. As such it suited the purposes of the group exactly.

Having decided how they were going to collect visitor information about the exhibition, evaluation session 2 was to develop the kinds of questions the working group thought it would be useful to ask people attending the exhibition. In small multi-aged groups, they quickly came up with key questions including the number of people who attended the exhibition; information about who attended including their age, gender, where they lived, their reasons for attending and their relationship to the school); how visitors felt about the exhibition (what they liked best and least, how could it have been improved) and what kind of exhibition they would they like to see the school do next. Generally, the pupils very quickly thought up a useful range of questions with minimal input form the researcher.

After sessions 2 and 3 the various lists of questions produced by the different sub-groups were amalgamated, by the PARPP researcher, into a final one-size A4 (for ease of handling) evaluation survey template. In session 4 this template then went back to the School Council group to be checked over and agreed. In this fourth session there was a lot of discussion by the pupils about the final wording of the evaluation survey that showed a keen understanding of the importance of getting the tone and content of the questions right. Eventually after final proof-reading by the PARPP researcher the evaluation was photocopied ready for the day of the exhibition. (See Figure 1 for a copy of a completed evaluation survey).

WORLD WAR 1 EXHIBITION SURVEY

Introduction (say this to make sure that people want to take part in the survey before you start).

We hope you don't mind us asking you a few questions about what you think of our exhibition.

Don't worry you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to.

How did you find out about the exhibition?

Someone told me about it ✓	I saw a poster	I was just walking by	Other

Some information about you: Circle the right answers

Male or (Female) ?

Age	4-7	7-11	11-16	16-21	21-39	40-59	60 + ✓

Tick any answers that describe you:

I am parent of a child at KHPS	I am a pupil at KHPS	I am a teacher at KHPS
I am related to a child in KHPS ✓	I work at KHPS	I live in kings Heath ✓

Why did you come to the exhibition?

I am interested in the school	I am interested in history generally	I am interested in WW1	I am interested in art projects	Other *It sounded interesting*

Some questions about the exhibition

Which part of the exhibition did you enjoy the most?

The talk about the Indian soldiers.

What have you learnt from this exhibition?

How many young men died in WW1

How could we improve this exhibition?

I don't think it needs improvement.

If there was another exhibition would you come? (Yes)/No

Do you have any suggestions for our next exhibition?

The history of Kings Heath

Thank you for taking part in our survey !

Figure 1. Completed evaluation survey.

Carrying out the evaluation

As discussed above, the original set of children who drew up the evaluation sheet were members of the School Council. However, not everyone from that original group was able to be involved in carrying out the evaluation as they were helping with other aspects of the exhibition. For this reason, other children, who had been part of the exhibition workshops, were asked if they would like to carry out the evaluation on the day of the exhibition. In the end, 12 children were recruited as

evaluators. They ranged from Year 1 pupils (aged 6) through to Years 4, 5 and 6 (aged respectively 9, 10 and 11). There was one very keen Year 1 child who needed to be partnered up with a more confident Year 6 child, but the other children stated that they were happy to carry out the evaluations by themselves.

On the day of the exhibition each evaluator had 10 forms on a clipboard. They were informally talked through the process of questioning visitors by the HTLA. For example, she asked them to give people time to look round before they were approached with the evaluation, and to respect peoples' decision not to take part and so on. Although the HTLA remained in the Exhibition Hall throughout the day, the pupil evaluators were left more or less to get on with carrying out evaluation. In practice, this meant that it was the pupils who decided who to approach and how long to spend with each respondent. They all asked at least 10 people and by the end of the day, 122 evaluations had been completed. Initially, it was observed by the HTLA that the evaluators tended to choose people that they knew, such as a parent, a friend's parents or a member of staff. However, as time went on other visitors noticed the clipboards and began to ask what the evaluators were doing and before long they too were being taken though the questions. Over the day it was clear that the pupils had gained confidence as evaluators as they began to ask an ever wider range of people coming through the door, which was exactly what we had hoped for.

Impact of the evaluation

The PARPP researcher, HTLA and children all agreed that the evaluation had been a worthwhile and interesting piece of work to be part of. The HTLA commented*:*

> Having been involved in the bid writing, exhibition and evaluation, from start to finish I can say that the evaluation was very useful to me in a number of ways. It has given me an idea of what to go for future exhibitions and it was helpful to know how many people came through the door. In particular, it gives us all an insight into who was actually attending the exhibition from the community, what their relationship to the school was, and perhaps most importantly what was actually interesting to them about the exhibition*.*

> We got a lot of positive feedback through the evaluation about how good it was to see what was going on inside the school; it felt good that we were opening the school up and welcoming the community in which was one of the stated aims of the exhibition when I initially wrote the bid. Feedback from parents was also very positive; they seemed to like knowing that their children had been involved in all aspects of the event. For me it made all that hard work all the more worthwhile because I had evidence that people had really liked and appreciated it.

The evaluation experience also had a real benefit for the pupils. The HTLA caught up with them the following week and asked how they felt about the experience of being an evaluator. It is clear from their comments that they had enjoyed the experience:

> I liked being a researcher as other children were interested in what I was being told
> > (Pupil evaluator A).

> *Doing the evaluation made me feel important*
> > (Pupil evaluator D).

Asking the visitors their questions appeared to make the pupil-evaluators aware that the work in the exhibition had a different audience from their usual audience of teachers and parents. In this way,

taking part in the evaluation made the pupil evaluators realise how much they had put into had the exhibition and what an impact it was having on the visitors:

> I enjoyed asking strangers questions and really felt good when they said how cool my school is
>
> (Pupil evaluator B.)

It also made the pupils evaluators think more about the exhibition as many of the people they were interviewing asked them questions as well, such as how they had got involved in the evaluation, how long it had taken to put the evaluation survey together and who had helped them.:

> Listening to people answering the questions made me think of what else I would like to know more about and what the next exhibition could be
>
> (Pupil evaluator C).

The process of being involved in the PARPP project also reinforced the HTLA's own commitment to encouraging pupils' potential as agentic researchers in their own right:

> I have definitely become more participatory in my work with the children. I feel more like about finding out from the kids what working what's not rather than just using my professional expertise or making assumptions, or just doing what has worked in the past. In our recently launched school newspaper the pupils have been involved in lots of different kinds of original research. As I now felt more confident that they would be able to rise to the challenge and sure enough they have been conducting media searches, carrying out interviews and surveys.

The evaluation also gave the school information about the impact of the event on the various visitors who attended on the day. For example, local shopkeepers reported an increase in trade, suggesting that the event had attracted different people into the school's locality. On reflection, this suggested to the HTLA that more time should be spent thinking about publicity and marketing. This formal side to the evaluation was important, as previously the school would have just relied on anecdotal evidence gleaned on the day. It also produced a wealth of information about what kinds of exhibition people would like to see next which flagged up what ultimately became the next event, a Shakespeare Day.

Due to the evaluation, therefore, the school now had hard data that they could reflect on and use to inform their next community event. In addition, the process and outcomes of the evaluation, as suggested by Kellett (2005) could have been extended further. For example, pupils could have been supported to present the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires using processes familiar from the maths curriculum, such as turning simple numerical data (the gender split of respondents, their ages and relationship to the school) into graphs or pie-charts that would help them to identify patterns in attendance and draw conclusions. Or they could have taken their experiences as evaluators and used it to create a presentation for Parents' Evening, the school governors or as part of a school assembly for the rest of the pupils.   On this occasion, however, the evaluation material gathered was used primarily to inform future event planning in terms of format and focus due to time and staffing constraint. However, in future it was agreed that scope for such extension activities should be built into any future PARPP collaborations.

Concluding reflections

This project, whilst limited in scope, opened up an important discussion in the participating school about the value of child-led research and the potential for further work in partnership with a local university. The positive experience of the pupils in terms of confidence and pride in their school was

evident in their feedback, and they proved to be extremely competent evaluators. Staff in the school were made more aware of how pupil voice, through research activities like the development and execution of the evaluation survey, can be made more visible and meaningful in the everyday operation of school life. The university meanwhile gained a valuable partner for child-led research as the school has already embarked on another PARPP project.

In more general terms, this project opens up a wider debate about the extent to which teachers and managers in primary schools could and should be working directly with pupils as active co-researchers about issues that impact on them in their school environment. Further work by the PARPP team suggests (publication pending) that there are clear benefits to pupils from engaging in positive experiences of active research. This is because pupils' ideas get taken seriously, they are listened to by their peers and the adults in the school and their decisions are respected and acted upon. In personal terms pupils get the chance to develop important interpersonal skills as they work with other children and adults through research activities, and there is a whole host of ways in which the data generated by research, and pupils' manipulation of it, can be fed into the school curriculum. Teachers benefit because researching with children can feed into their teaching and learning by encouraging a distinctly collaborative and constructivist way of working. There is also often a reported increase in their own confidence as active researchers of their working environment. Lastly, school environments are enhanced by a commitment to child-led research as it heightens an appreciation by all stake-holders in the school, namely parents/carers, governors and head teachers, of how children are more than capable of exploring and expressing their own interests, opinions and needs. This, one may contend, is more useful than the adults in the school simply assuming they know what they are without asking or conferring with the children.

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