

Institution: University of East Anglia
Unit of Assessment: 25 Education
Title of case study: Children's participation in decision-making in primary classrooms
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The case study addresses the impact of the project 'Children Decide: power, participation and purpose in the primary classroom' (2004–6) regarding its two aims: developing collaborative approaches to decision-making in schools, and advancing methodological understanding of children as action researchers. The project made a subsequent methodological contribution (children as researchers) to educational evaluation and policy in two international organisations. Since 2008, the project has had a direct and significant impact on children's participation in decision-making in Norfolk schools, as reported by the teachers and those who attended dissemination conferences and professional development initiatives, and nationally by educators who used the published report.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The 'Children Decide' project focused on children researching their role in decision-making in their classrooms and schools, with a view to increasing their involvement. Led by co-investigators, Sue Cox (Senior Lecturer), at the University of East Anglia (UEA), 1999-present, and Anna Robinson-Pant (Professor) at UEA 2000-present, the action research project was carried out by children and their class teachers in six Norfolk primary schools from 2004 to 2006. Recognised as fulfilling their aim to support practitioner and policy-focused research, the project was funded by the CfBT Education Trust.</p> <p>As the project aimed to introduce more participatory approaches to decision-making in classrooms, this necessarily had implications for the ways in which adults worked with children as action researchers. The project explored the constraints encountered by both children and teachers in sharing decisions, and in carrying out action research, and identified two dimensions of impact: the teachers' thinking and action, as well as children's research and decision-making. Children researched their own decision-making and began to take more ownership of decision-making in their classrooms. Teachers developed more insight into children's values, priorities and practices, though they struggled with their need to mediate the project aims in the context of their professional role in the current target-driven school culture.</p> <p>Key research insights were related to methodological innovation, as well as the empirical findings around the classroom context of decision-making noted above (see reference 3). Building on the long-established methodological contribution of the School's Centre for Applied Research in Education to action research in schools, the project pioneered the idea of engaging young children as action researchers. As well as developing child-friendly methods for data collection and analysis, the project influenced children's roles and identities in the classroom as a result of their involvement as action researchers. In academic publications, Cox and Robinson-Pant (see references 4 and 6) explored the methodological findings around facilitating children's action research in relation to negotiating differing identities, communicative practices and notions of risk. Their earlier CfBT project, 'Empowering Children through Visual Communication' (2002-3), explored how adult-child power relationships in school councils were being affected by the promotion of literacy practices common in adult meetings, such as a written agenda and minutes (references 1 and 2). These research findings shaped the facilitation methods used in the 'Children Decide' project and its aims (see reference 3).</p> <p>Both projects brought together Cox's expertise in primary pedagogy and practice, and Robinson-Pant's expertise in participatory research in international development (particularly in adapting visual methods from Participatory Rural Appraisal, a methodology widely used in the South to empower marginalised groups). This partnership developed dynamic relationships between</p>

international, national and regional perspectives, shaping their subsequent ESRC seminar series on 'Children as Decision Makers' (2007) which led to the international dissemination and impact of the original 'Children Decide' research findings in contexts beyond schools and beyond the UK. Educators, activists and researchers working in countries of both the South and North came together to share and reflect on approaches to facilitating children's participation in educational decision-making (see reference 5). This included hosting an international research seminar in one of the Norfolk partner primary schools so that teachers and children involved in the original Children Decide project could contribute to these wider debates.

3. References to the research

Publications

1. Cox, S. and Robinson-Pant, A. (2004) 'Communication practices in primary school councils', in Street, B. (ed.), *Literacy across educational contexts*, Caslon Press, Philadelphia, ISBN 0-9727507-2-X, pp 43 -64
2. Cox, S. and Robinson-Pant, A (2006) 'Enhancing participation in primary school and class councils through visual communication', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36/4, 515-532
3. Cox, S., Currie, D., Frederick, K., Jarvis, D., Lawes, S., Millner, E., Nudd, K., Robinson-Pant, A., Stubbs, I., Taylor, T. and D. White (2007) *Children Decide: Power, participation and purpose in the primary classroom, A guide for teachers based on a research project*, funded by CfBT Education Trust, CfBT Guidance series, available on: <http://cdn.cfbt.com/~media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2007/r-children-decide-2007.pdf>
4. Cox, S. and Robinson-Pant, A. (2008) 'Power, participation and decision making in the primary classroom: children as action researchers', *Educational Action Research*, 16/4, 457-468
5. Cox, S., Dyer, C., Robinson-Pant, A. and M. Schweisfurth (2010) *Children as Decision Makers in Education: Sharing Experiences Across Cultures*, Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd: London (edited volume)
6. Cox, S. and Robinson-Pant, A. (2010) 'Children as researchers: a question of risk?' in Cox et al (ed) *Children as Decision Makers in Education*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.: pp 143-152

Grants

'Children Decide: power, participation and purpose in the primary classroom', £52,000 awarded by CfBT Education Trust to Sue Cox and Anna Robinson-Pant. Project ran from 2004-2006. CfBT awarded a follow-up grant for production of booklets about 'Children Decide' project for wider distribution to schools and educational policy makers in the UK (01/1/2007-01/03/2007). An earlier CfBT-funded project on school councils in primary schools (2002-3, co-directed by Cox and Robinson-Pant, £27,796) 'Empowering Children through Visual Communication' influenced the methods and aims of 'Children Decide', as noted above.

Evidence of quality of research

The quality of the research is evidenced by an unsolicited approach from a major international NGO to conduct commissioned child-led research based on the 'Children Decide' methodology: 'Exploring the global dimension: a study of attitudes, values and understanding among teachers and pupils in four Cambridgeshire schools' (Campaign for Female Education, Camfed International, £10,500, 1/05/2008-1/09/2008, Robinson-Pant (Principal Investigator), Cox, Watson, Yarker); and the success of an ESRC seminar proposal, which built directly on the project findings: 'Children as Decision Makers' (Principal Investigator Sue Cox, with Anna Robinson-Pant (UEA), Michele Schweisfurth (Birmingham University) and Caroline Dyer (University of Leeds), £15,323, 1/9/06 – 30/9/07). The funding agency, CfBT Education Trust, identified the 'Children Decide' project as of particularly high quality and impact (in relation to their other funded projects) and selected it to be profiled in a TES article. The project report and articles based on the findings (Cox and Robinson-Pant (2008, 2010)) have been cited in 13 high quality peer reviewed articles in educational journals. The 'Children Decide' study has also been referred to within key research literature in the field of participation.

4. Details of the impact

This case study considers the evidence of reach and impact on teacher professional development, educational decision-making and classroom practice in the schools directly involved at the time, as well as on organisations that adopted the approach after reading about the project.

Dissemination strategy: Immediately after and during the project lifetime (2005-7), dissemination took place at the local level through the following channels:

- Ongoing development of children's and teachers' practices related to children's participation and decision-making through meetings at the six schools directly involved.
- In Service Training Sessions in local schools given by teachers in the research team.
- The project team published a report (see reference 3) and organised conferences attended by head-teachers and teachers to disseminate ideas and approaches.
- A conference was organised by the children, teachers and researchers in order for children in the six different schools to share the research findings.
- The UEA researchers were interviewed by local radio about the project.

In 2007, in order to reach a national audience, CfBT Education Trust commissioned the team to produce a guide for teachers/educational decision makers across the UK (distributed in hard copy and on CfBT Education Trust's website:

<http://cdn.cfbt.com/~media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2007/r-children-decide-2007.pdf>).

The project was also profiled in a Times Educational Supplement feature ('From tiny decisions, great leaders grow', April 2007, see source 2). In 2007, Cox shared the approach with teachers and children in six primary schools in New Zealand. In 2006, Cox and Robinson-Pant obtained ESRC funding for a seminar series on 'Children as Decision Makers', bringing the project into international policy and practice contexts through involving researchers, activists and policy-makers (including Non-Governmental Organisations: Forum for Popular Education Nepal, Oxfam GB, People's Action Forum Zambia, EveryChild, and Diganter India). A substantial set of materials was developed into an edited book published by Continuum (reference 5).

Nature of the impact: In the period 2008-2013, we identify the impact of Children Decide in relation to its two differing but interconnected aims. With regard to **enhancing children's participation in educational decision-making**, there is evidence of on-going impact on how teachers involve children in decision-making within their schools and classrooms in the local area. This was particularly so in schools where the research was intensively carried out: a teacher commented that the approach is embedded as it still influenced school council activities, with children taking more responsibility for their own learning (source 3). Impact after 2008 was also noted by those who had attended dissemination events, read the CfBT report or engaged with the research at the later ESRC seminar series. A head teacher who attended a dissemination conference in 2007 reported the impact of the approach on the development of their Early Years curriculum (see source 4). The director of an educational NGO working in Zambia who attended the ESRC seminar series noted that the work had led her to explore children's participation further, particularly in relation to school governance (source 5).

Evidence of the impact on **methodological approaches to working with children as researchers** has come from NGO practitioners, international policy makers, teachers, head teachers and teacher educators. The significance of this impact, within the policy context, is that international development organisations have adapted the research approach for planning and evaluation purposes. In 2011, the Education Chief of UNICEF Bangladesh noted the influence of the 'Children Decide' approach on the development of their Child Friendly School Initiative (source 7). An environmental researcher working with an indigenous community in Mexico drew on the approach to involve children in developing a participatory environmental education curriculum for a small NGO (source 8). In 2008 Camfed International commissioned Robinson-Pant and Cox to conduct a child-led baseline study incorporating research methods from the 'Children Decide' project, in order to monitor their development education programme in Cambridgeshire schools (source 6).

The project also continues to have an impact within schools and higher educational institutions, beyond Norfolk. Within a School of Education in the Midlands, a teacher educator described how the ethos and activities described in the research reports had been incorporated into the BA course for classroom assistants. Since she left the university, certain elements which she designed on the basis of the Children Decide project have been retained in the course (source 9). A head teacher in Cambridgeshire commented on the impact on her current work in schools, enabling her to develop her own practice methodologically (source 10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. CfBT commissioned Teachers' Guide. Available from the project team and the CfBT website at <http://cdn.cfbt.com/~media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2007/r-children-decide-2007.pdf>
2. TES profile : <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2366467>
3. Norfolk teacher-researcher from the original project: 'We have a very active school council now, with a group of children implementing and carrying out an action plan to achieve Eco School silver status at the moment...Most classes now start a topic with the children deciding what they want to find out. They also take much more responsibility for how well they are doing and what they need to learn next' [Email communication, 17/11/11]
4. A head teacher who had attended a Children Decide schools' dissemination event in 2006: 'Working with the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage] we have used the approach in planning with the children to make their learning more effective...We have regularly incorporated these principles in their learning and I consider the approach to be very effective in developing children's confidence in communication, negotiation, democracy and project management' [Email communication, 18/11/11]
5. An NGO director in Zambia who attended the ESRC seminar series: 'This work led me to decide to study children's participation further...finding out what the prevailing situation is, to examining how communities and schools can be encouraged to allow and enhance children's participation' (Email communication, 05/03/10).
6. Contract from Camfed International (1/4/2008) to carry out study using 'children as researchers' approach and report: 'Exploring the global dimension: a study of attitudes, values and understanding among teachers and pupils in four Cambridgeshire schools'
7. Education Chief, UNICEF Bangladesh, as a result of reading the full research report and discussing with Cox and Robinson-Pant about how to adapt this approach to the Bangladesh school context: 'We remain interested in the Children Decide approach and intend to use the approach as part of our Child Friendly School Initiative that starts from January 2012'. [Email communication, 20/11/11]
8. Project Coordinator, having read the research report and discussed ideas for incorporating into an environmental curriculum with Cox and Robinson-Pant [Email communication, 7/12/11]
9. A teacher educator who had read research reports and attended ESRC seminar: 'the thinking involved in this research was enormously influential on my subsequent work. The casting of both the students and their future pupils as researchers provided an accessible way into academic study for aspiring teachers from non-academic backgrounds'. [From face-to-face comments, 15/11/11]
10. A primary head teacher who had attended the ESRC seminar series and used the project report and Continuum book: 'The research has been particularly helpful to me in my work with schools. The range of contributions from people working in different cultural contexts, sectors and phases of education [at the ESRC seminar series] was very enriching and enabled me to develop my own practice methodologically and extend that of others with good examples from the research.' [Email communication, 21/11/11]