“*Learning about research was confusing until we started creating our own questions and research*”: Enacting Student Voice through a ‘Students as Enquirers’ project

## Kate Wall, Amy Hanna, Kath McCrorie, Will Quirke, Nova Scott, and Rebekah Sims, University of Strathclyde

## With Lorna Ross and Elizabeth, Marysia, Brooke, Amy, Freya and Sophie, Barrhead High School, East Renfrewshire

Despite Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) being common parlance in Scottish schools, children often remain positioned with little voice or power to make decisions, especially in dialogue about teaching, learning, and curriculum (Flutter, 2007; Leat and Reid 2012). *Students as Researchers* tackles these critiques by recognising children as agentic who have expertise the adults do not (Bakhtiar, *et al.* 2023). This approach is emancipatory and radical; through the research process students develop enquiry skills, with opportunities to engage with self and others in novel, creative ways (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

This paper reports on a *Students as Enquirers* project at a Scottish high school. Offering children’s accounts of engagement in their own voices – something missing within much of the academic work on such initiatives – we exemplify the reflexive process undertaken and give insight into the effectiveness of the process and key learnings that arose.

# *Students as Enquirers* Process

Barrhead High School serves children from 11 to 18-years-old. As a Gold Award Rights Respecting School pupil voice is highly valued. Practitioner enquiry is central to the whole-school approach to professional learning and in 2022/23 this has been coached by staff from the University of Strathclyde. This *Students as Enquirers* project aimed to mirror the cycles of research the teachers were undertaking with a group of student volunteers from S1 and S2 (11-13 years old) led by Lorna Ross, .

As in practitioner enquiry (Hall and Wall, 2019), the students had autonomy over their focus and created projects that had an impact on their student experiences. The overarching prompt was ‘how can the Barrhead High community be improved’. ‘Improvements’ selected included transitions, homework, bullying, and environment. Notably, students considered not only what impacted them personally, but also what improvements would serve the school community.

The University team facilitated ten 1.5-hour sessions, and a day visit to the University (table 1). Workshops spanned the entire enquiry process: project focus, research questions, evidence collection, analysis, intended audience and reporting strategy. University staff functioned as coaches and supporters of the enquiry process, acknowledging, valuing, and facilitating the students’ expertise. The children made all decisions about the direction, purpose, and execution of their project.

Table 1: Timetable of sessions

****

# Student Reflections

Two groups volunteered to share learning reflections. Their contributions are presented in full and unedited. These researchers are named with full permission and accredited as co-authors of this paper as part of our commitment to children’s rights and the value of young researchers’ voices.

***Elizabeth, Marysia and Brooke***

*The Problem*

*We noticed that homework is different for everybody and some people find it easy, but others find it very hard. If two people do the same homework, and one person finds it easy, they understand and can do the work in class, but if the other person finds it really hard, they could talk to a teacher but if they still don’t get it, they’ve not done their work and it counts as a fail. Students might have a family situation that means they can’t do the homework and they're not comfortable explaining it to a teacher.*

*The enquiry plan*

*The research question is ‘What is the effect of homework on students, does it need to be improved and if so, how?’. We will do a questionnaire so that we can get as much information as possible, and then analyse it and ask more in-depth questions with a smaller group of people. We can identify key points to analyse. Then, that way we can say a lot of people said that they found their homework difficult in one subject but how is that different from another subject with similar work, and how is that fixable.*

*Why student research is important*

*Some students might find it more comfortable to talk to a fellow student instead of a teacher because if they answer a questionnaire with a teacher, they might be concerned as to how the teacher will react, and thus they won’t give an honest answer. Also, pupils now will have had the same experience as us and we will have a better understanding of what the school is like now.*

***Amy, Freya and Sophie***

*Being part of the Strathclyde learner enquiry group has been an exciting experience. At first, we thought that learning about research was confusing until we started creating our own questions and research. Then we got the hang of it. We have learnt different research techniques and methods. We learnt how to show our work in new ways. We also had the opportunity to visit Strathclyde University which was our favourite part! We felt like real researchers and made us want to be part of a university. After our visit to the university, we really started on our own research. Our question was - ‘Do you feel like you can be yourself whilst transitioning to high school?’ We felt this was important because P7s can face challenges moving up to high school. Reflecting on our journey we learnt a lot about research and about how to display our work. We think this will help us in our future. It was different working with researchers because we were working in small groups. We think there could have been a slight increase in the pace leading up to our research starting. Overall, we loved Strathclyde learner enquiry and would encourage people to sign up.*

# Discussion

Analysis shows a fine balance was needed between developing relationships and pacing the enquiry process to capitalise on students’ enthusiasm for research while also building mutual trust across boundaries. Sessions needed to become brave spaces (Cook-Sather 2016) where students could state opinions and challenge adults, and vice versa. This included a mutual trust in regard the value of the chosen enquiry topics and the nature of the research process to be undertaken. The university trip’s informality was catalytic for developing this as the activities facilitated informal chat and relationship building, while also giving insight into our domain. We noticed a renewed enthusiasm for research during and after the university visit.

If we were to repeat the project, greater involvement of enquiry-experienced Barrhead teaching staff, might have enabled greater synergy between the ongoing teachers’ and students’ projects in school. This may have facilitated ‘harmony’ (Flutter (2007) between pupil and teacher voice, with tighter feedback loops between the process and outcomes of each group (Wall and Hall, 2016). However, we also recognise this may have impeded students’ agency in noticing aspects of school improvement – issues that may be urgent but not part of the teachers’ enquiry agendas.

## References

1. Bakhtiar, A., Lang, M., Shelley, B., & West, M. (2023). Research with and by children: A systematic literature review. *Review of Education*, *11*(1)
2. Cook-Sather A (2016) Creating brave spaces within and through student-faculty pedagogical partnerships. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education,* **1**(18): 1–5.
3. Fielding, M., & Bragg, S. (2003). *Students as researchers. Making a difference*. Pearson Publishing. Available at:
4. Flutter, J. (2007) Teacher Development and Pupil Voice. *The Curriculum Journal*, **19**(3): 343-354
5. Hall, E. and Wall, K. (2019) *Research Methods for Understanding Professional Learning*, Bloomsbury
6. Leat, D. and Reid, A. (2012) Exploring the Role of Students as Researchers in the Process of Curriculum Development, *The Curriculum Journal*, **23**(2): 189-205
7. United Nations (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: United Nations.
8. Wall K and Hall E (2016) Teachers as metacognitive role models. *European Journal of Teacher Education,* **39**(4): 403–418.