

**Institution:** The Open University

**Unit of Assessment:** C25 Education

**Title of case study:** Empowering children and young people

**1. Summary of the impact**

Our work on children’s agency in research has had three impacts:

- the Children’s Research Centre (CRC) created new opportunities for children and young people to engage in their own research and publish their reports online
- their findings have impacted on policy and practice, for example on support for children with Graves’ disease
- participating in the research process has positively changed the way children and young people view themselves.

This approach has been replicated in Australia, Turkey, New Zealand, Norway and Qatar. The CRC website hosts 150 successful projects by children and young people, and through the Diana Award more than 1500 children were supported in their research on cyberbullying.

**2. Underpinning research**

Kellett’s pioneering research on children’s agency is rooted in work within the Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET) to establish a new sociology of childhood, which has asked ‘What is a good childhood?’, and ‘How can we understand the experience of childhood?’. Kellett’s contribution has focused on a child’s right to a research voice and on understanding how this can be meaningfully and authentically facilitated.

Intrinsic to this is an interrogation of the contested nature of child-led research. Kellett’s work challenged established conceptualisations of children’s competency and the societal impact of knowledge generated from children’s insider perspectives. Her research examines contemporary shifts in the status of children in society as represented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which addresses children’s entitlement to be informed, consulted and involved in all decisions that affect their lives. Analysis of this shift in the status of children, and the impetus towards participation, voice and agency, is core to Kellett’s theoretical conceptualisation of child-led research. Her work draws on analogous paradigms of feminist and emancipatory methodologies.

Kellett’s research has identified the significance of the child’s voice in the research process, the effect of acknowledging voice, and ways in which this can be strengthened or curtailed within child-led research. Her research identifies the original and authentic contribution that child researchers can make to understanding childhood and children’s lives. It examines how assigning value to this contribution shifts our understanding of children. Kellett’s exploration of ethical complexities focuses on the roles and responsibilities of child researchers, their adult supporters and the position of the research community more generally in creating appropriate ethical frameworks. Kellett’s work has influenced current discourse about the ethical complexities of involving children in research. She has also examined how child-led research is received, scrutinised and measured and considered whether this is appropriately done in an adult arena, child arena or a shared arena. How diversity is represented within the field of child-led research has been a key theme, with work to examine how children at the margins of society are included in the research voice, notably young people with learning difficulties and children living with disadvantage.

Related action research has developed an approach to provide quality research training for children and young people, enabling them to make informed choices about research design from the outset and to take ownership. Kellett spent several years designing, trialling and evaluating a

flexible and effective training programme. Underpinning this is a body of work exploring discourses on methodological, ethical and evaluation issues in child-led research. New approaches that value participatory peer methods are foregrounded in the training process and materials.

More recent work by Kerawalla focuses on the application of new digital technologies to child-led research. Her work has explored issues arising from developing child-friendly virtual learning environments and their role in widening participation in child-led research. She has progressed this work through her successful *My Shout* interactive web-based programme.

### Key researchers

M. Kellett, Professor of Childhood and Youth; Dr L. Kerawalla, Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies; Dr S. Bragg, Research Fellow (until 2012).

### 3. References to the research

Kellett, M., Forrest, R., Dent, N. and Ward, S. (2004) 'Just teach us the skills please, we'll do the rest: empowering ten-year-olds as active researchers', *Children and Society*, vol. 18, no. 5, pp. 329–43. ISSN: 1099-0860.

Kellett, M. (2009) 'Children as researchers: what we can learn from them about the impact of poverty on literacy opportunities?' *International Journal of Inclusive Education (Special Issue – Education and Poverty)*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 395–408. ISSN: 1360-3116.

Kellett, M. (2010) 'WeCan2: Exploring the implications of young people with learning disabilities engaging in their own research', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 31–44. ISSN: 1469-591X.

Scanlon, E., Anastopoulou, S., Kerawalla, L. and Mulholland, P. (2011) 'How technology resources can be used to represent personal inquiry and support students' understanding of it across contexts', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 27, no. 6, pp. 516–29. ISSN: 1365-2729.

Kellett, M. (2011) 'Empowering children and young people as researchers: overcoming barriers and building capacity', *Child Indicators Research Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 205–19. ISSN: 1874-897X.

**All journals named above employ an anonymised peer review process.**

### Research funding

2004–08: £20,000 awarded by Hertfordshire LEA, Milton Keynes Participation Fund and Lucre Communications to Prof M. Kellett to fund child research outreach projects.

2004: £7,300 awarded by Department of Transport to Prof M. Kellett for a project relating to children researching mobility issues.

2005–06: £19,000 awarded by Carnegie Youth Trust to Prof M. Kellett for a project evaluating impact of children as researchers.

2006–09: £27,000 awarded by Joseph Rowntree to Prof M. Kellett for a project on Education and Poverty.

2006–09: £31,000 awarded by Diana Award to Prof M. Kellett to fund the 'Young Ambassadors' project.

2007–09: £9,150 awarded by Mencap to Prof M. Kellett to fund the 'WeCan2 disability youth democracy' project.

2008–12: £148,000 awarded by Perret Endowment to Prof M. Kellett to fund the ‘Children as researchers’ project.

2006–07: £73,250 awarded by Hackney Local Authority to Prof M. Kellett and GRUBB Institute for a project on ‘Student researchers and school transformation’.

2005–10: £125,000 awarded by UK Research Council to the Open University, Prof N. Mercer (PI) , for an Academic Fellowship undertaken by Dr S. Bragg.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Research on empowering children as researchers, led to the creation of CREET’s Children’s Research Centre (CRC). Kellett and Kerawalla have created a practical process to support children as young as nine in undertaking and disseminating their own research. There are more than 150 original research studies by children and young people published on the CRC website, and more have been supported through partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The CRC was runner-up in the 2013 Guardian University Awards for ‘Outstanding Research Impact’. It is now entered in that newspaper’s online ideas bank as an example of best practice.

The CRC has empowered children to generate knowledge from their insider perspectives that has impacted on policy and practice. Topics include: cultural and race identity issues; bereavement and children’s views about the police. During 2009-11 the CRC collaborated with the Diana Award NGO to support over 1500 young people in researching cyberbullying, the biggest project of its kind in England. The published report featured in 71 media outlets spearheading national anti-bullying week (2011). As a result, the UK Government and several internet companies, e.g. Google, Virgin, Carphone Warehouse, and 3 Mobile, consulted directly with the young researchers about implementation of their safeguarding recommendations. Individual projects have also generated findings which have impacted on children’s lives. For example, research by 10-year-old Shannon Davidson on social isolation factors for children with Graves’ disease changed practice at Great Ormond Street Hospital. It led to better support through inclusion of a children’s page in the hospital newsletter and a child editor (the first being Shannon herself).

The CRC has pursued its commitment to social inclusion by working with partners, for example work with Mencap to support young people with learning difficulties. Research by the young people into meaningful participation in youth councils identified problems and suggested solutions. Their WeCan2 toolkit was developed to change how youth democracy forums are run. This was adopted in two local authorities, Devon and Lancashire. The CRC model informed the development of *The Centre*, a collaboration between the University of Central Lancashire and local youth organisations which now has a young researcher component.

The reach of the CRC model has been expanded by using new technologies, enabling children to be supported through virtual environments. Kerawalla’s community project with the 4th Newport Pagnell Guides group (2011-12) focused on key issues for Guide members, such as researching the provision of parks and shops in their area and understanding the police. Guides attended a video production workshop at the OU on how to use video to convey their experiences as researchers and presented their findings to the local mayor. The success of this local partnership led to design workshops with the national Girl Guides and to the new community research badge, *Streets Ahead!* This has now been awarded to 6500 Guides (10- to14-year-olds) nationally. The Newport Pagnell group leader commented ‘The widespread uptake of the new *Streets Ahead!* badge illustrates the success of our collaboration with the OU. By working together we have had (and continue to have) a positive impact’. The impact of the technology they used is addressed in our ‘Enabling publics to participate in science learning through technology’ case study.

Participation in the CRC has impacted on children and young people positively. An investigation into these impacts revealed: raised self-esteem and a sense of worth; increased self-confidence; the development of transferable study skills; sharpened critical thinking skills; more effective communication skills; increased creativity and the emergence of independent learning. As one

participant reported 'I went to an ICT show recently and was able to interview some of the reps, using my interview skills with questions I had prepared. If I hadn't done the CRC project I wouldn't have had the knowledge or confidence to do such a thing' (child researcher, presentation to Royal College of GPs, 2013). The child researchers have been investigating these effects and co-publishing the outcomes (Mann, Liley and Kellett, 2013).

The CRC model of child-led research has had international impact. Kellett was appointed international expert to a United Nations Development Programme project to develop young researchers in Cyprus, resulting in a resource book. Working in 2008 with teachers in Qatar, Kellett adapted CRC materials to produce a culturally appropriate training resource for schools. This became embedded in Qatari educational policy, and since 2009 an annual National Student Research Fair has taken place. Kellett's CRC model has been adopted by NGOs and children's organisations in the UK and internationally, e.g. Arastirmaci Cocuk Merkezi, a centre in Turkey based on the CRC (<http://en.acmtr.org/>) works in collaboration with the Darussafaka Foundation to empower orphaned children as researchers.

In partnership with UnitingCare Burnside, Kellett was instrumental in steering the first child-led research programme in Australia ([www.becausechildrenmatter.org.au](http://www.becausechildrenmatter.org.au)). The 'Today and Tomorrow Research' project, targeted at children living in disadvantaged communities, was positively evaluated by the New South Wales Commission for Children, who noted the inspiration for the work lay in Kellett's research and use of the CRC model (p.11). It has influenced the way government and NGOs share knowledge generation and decision-making with children. The NSW Commission have approached UnitingCare Burnside to fund further child-led research. Kellett's mentoring of CRC-inspired projects is extending the impact. For example, the Children and Youth Community Laboratory initiative in Norway and the Kids in the City project in New Zealand (SHORE and Whariki Research Centre). Kellett's key contribution to Childwatch's international thematic group on ethical practice further underlines the CRC's international influence.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Chief Executive (retired) and now Youth Ambassador, The Diana Award
2. Children's Research Centre (CRC), <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>
3. Newell S. and Graham A. (2012) 'Child-led research: a pilot of the Today & Tomorrow Research Program', Sydney, NSW, (evaluation report of UnitingCare Burnside work) available from [http://www.childrenyoungpeopleandfamilies.org.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/86859/Child-LedResearchAPilotoftheToday\\_and\\_TomorrowResearchProgram.pdf](http://www.childrenyoungpeopleandfamilies.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/86859/Child-LedResearchAPilotoftheToday_and_TomorrowResearchProgram.pdf) (accessed 05.11.13)
4. Co-Director, 'The Centre', University of Central Lancashire
5. Director, Children's Research Centre, Turkey
6. Principle Researcher-Program Development, Social Justice Unit, UnitingCare Burnside
7. Researcher, SHORE and Whariki Research Centre
8. Announcement of Qatar annual research fair, <http://www.sec.gov.qa/En/Media/News/Pages/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=3103>