

University of Warwick

Education as a Human Right.

IGGY Junior Commission Research
Project 2009

Supervisor: Cath Lambert.
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Suzanne Linstead
Marian Orton
Kerry Smith
Julie Tavner

Warwick URSS.

Education as a Human Right: IGGY Junior Commission Research Project 2009

In the adult academic world the research process is greatly valued as an advanced learning tool and aid for critical thinking. This importance is increasingly being acknowledged in personal and professional development yet it is argued that traditionally children have been excluded from this learning process as research methodology is considered too difficult for them (Kellest, 2005). However, according to Jones (2004: 114), advances in Social Sciences together with the 'increasing recognition of children's rights of expressions' (article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) have ensured that children are not only participants in research but also increasingly undertake valuable research. The Warwick Junior Commission is a 'specially adapted version of the Warwick Commission tailored for the International Gateway for Gifted Youth (IGGY) community' (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/iggy/events/junior-commission>) In 2008-2009, ten Junior Commissioners have been provided with an opportunity to share their knowledge and opinions of accepted knowledge.

Children are defined by the UN convention as being anyone under the age of 18. Children, however, are not a homogenous group, but comprise a wide variety of characteristics and dispositions. In this case, the ten Junior Commissioners were selected via an international competition. The entrants were asked to submit a piece of work around the theme of "Education and Skills as a Human Right". Hundreds of entries were received from dozens of countries with the winning entrants were selected from a shortlist by a panel of leading human rights lawyers, academics and students from around the world. This was important as, as Ball et al (1994) have shown, previous education studies and the policies which then derive from them, have been driven by the self interest of the school and the parent.

One of the aims of IGGY is to challenge the 'hierarchy of credibility'. Becker (1970) notes participants in society or any ranked group tend to take for granted the hierarchical order of accepted knowledge. If we are to be 'proper' members of society we are 'morally bound to accept the definitions imposed on reality by a super ordinate in preference to the definitions espoused by subordinates' (Becker, 1998: 90). As a general rule, it is adults who debate the issues and rights of children. Taylor considers the possibility of arguing that to be human, 'confers personhood and absolute rights which should not be circumscribed by age, ability, nationality, gender, or any other characteristic' (Taylor, in Lewis and Lindsay, 2000: 21). These considerations are echoed by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) with consideration to intelligence. Giving the Junior Commissioners 'a voice' challenged the ideology of the division of intelligence into hierarchical structures in which adults were the teachers. It is important to create opportunities for children and young people to explore and create the world they are interested in and to produce knowledge about this world. Therefore,

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children and young people become producers of knowledge, rather than consumers only and have an impact on their world.

It would be naive to imagine that even the most proficient researchers could entirely rid themselves of 'adult' prejudices. It would appear therefore that the key to better understanding of children and childhood is for children themselves to become active researchers. Traditionally, children's involvement with the world around them is limited and constrained by the rules which adults set up for them. Their activities are frequently limited and often determined by the adult's agendas and priorities. 'Children ask different questions, have different priorities and concerns and see the world through different eyes. This important contribution to knowledge can only be made by the children themselves'. (Kellett, 2005).

Throughout this research study, each of the ten Junior Commissioners devised, with the support of their peers and academic mentors, a focused research question which relates to their specific geographical, social and educational context, which was then used as the starting point from which to generate 'expert' knowledge with regards to the manifestation of Education as a Human Right in a localised context. The focus of the research was on collaboration, not competition, and each Commissioner was encouraged to work at their own pace and to devise an appropriate micro-project for their own location and circumstances. The emphasis is on the young person as a researcher with the potential to turn their unique localised experiences into constructive knowledge which has much wider relevance. As part of the process, the Commissioners reviewed their own and each others' data in the light of the overarching theme. This was done via website blogs and email in anticipation of meeting to consolidate their ideas into a research output throughout their time at IGGY U Warwick '09.

Dr. Cath Lambert, Research and Project Leader, was very conscious of the research project as being something of a 'pedagogic experiment' (Rancière, 1991). The outcomes of experiments are necessarily unpredictable and therefore this was both exciting and anxiety-inducing. The diversity of the group (in terms of age, geographical location, research interests and expertise) was very wide and added to the feeling of productive uncertainty about how research would shape up and what the final output would look like, as well as how the process would be experienced by all involved. The project required utilisation of online facilities for communication in a safe environment with considerations for ethics and safety throughout this process. Jones (2004), states that young people cannot be held responsible for their research. Furthermore, involving children as researchers requires 'attention to processes' (Jones, 2004: 117) including planning, and design, access and reflection. The University of Warwick was ultimately responsible for the research undertaken by the Junior Commissioners, however, students were given autonomy when planning and designing their research. Communication between both the Commissioners themselves and us as mentors was regularly challenged through the medium. Conversations via email rely on a different set of socially accepted rules than face to face conversation. Indeed,

the Commissioners are more accustomed to these rules and email communication was an area of their expertise.

Meeting for the first time on Warwick campus in July 2009, the Junior Commissioners, Academic Mentors and Project Leader worked together intensively for one week. We worked at the Reinvention Centre at Westwood, an open classroom designed to enable discussion, movement and active and collaborative learning. The Commissioners accumulated their research results in order to disseminate their ideas to the widest audience. In order to achieve these bold outcomes, co-operation was essential alongside the ability to combine methods and results. According to Cohen (1994), cooperative learning has gained increasing acceptance in the classroom as a strategy for producing learning gains, development of higher order thinking, prosocial behaviour and interracial acceptance. It is also a method applied to manage academic heterogeneity in classrooms with a wide range of achievement in basic skills. Democracy is best learned in a democratic setting, where participation is encouraged, where views can be expressed openly and discussed, where there is freedom of expression for pupils and teachers and where there is fairness and justice.

The group was divided into three smaller groups along the lines of three strong themes which emerged from the research. Theoretically, small groups offer special opportunities for active learning and substantive conversation (Nystrad, 1986) that are essential for authentic achievement, a goal recommended in the current drive to restructure schools (Newman, 1991). Small groups have also been widely recommended as a means to achieve equity (Oakes and Lipton, 1990). To work together students have to specify goals more precisely, plan procedures, generate and select alternatives, and review or modify their plans. The style of pedagogy adopted for the Junior Commissioners' week at Warwick was dialogic. Two way dialogue has been assumed to be the essence of good teaching by academics such as John Dewey in *Pedagogic Creed* (Dworkin, 1959). Bruner (1990) defines pedagogy as 'an extension of conversation'. The mind of each pupil is unique and enormously complex. It is only through purposeful dialogue that a teacher can be sure to start from where the learner is, appreciate what is to be learned from the learner's point of view.

Whilst the process of the research was important, there was also great emphasis placed on the output. If research sets out to 'make a difference' then there has to be a means whereby the findings can be shared with others, particularly with others who will benefit from any new knowledge which has been created. According to Kellett (2005) an increasingly popular genre is video documentary and this format is particularly attractive to pupils who do not have strong literacy skills or are reluctant writers. Video can be a very effective way of presenting all or part of a research project, in form of a 'mini-documentary'. A simple, short well-planned video documentary can be extremely effective way to disseminate pupils' research. It was decided that the Commissioners would present their findings to IGGY U Warwick '09, in the form of a short half-hour film.

The decision to make a film was taken fairly late in the process. However, the commitment to a 'bold output' had been there from the beginning. According to Cath Lambert (Research and Project Leader) there were two main reasons for this. Firstly, the Junior Commission itself was established with the aim of having some wider impact and therefore it was important to produce something tangible. Secondly, so much research activity carried out by young people as part of their formal education results in assessments which are rarely read or seen by anyone other than an examiner. Working beyond the limitations of a formal (and sometimes stifling) curriculum and pedagogy, Cath Lambert wanted the Commissioners to have the opportunity to shape their research into a product which could be more widely communicated. Furthermore, According to Gareth Bennett (IGGY Co-coordinator), the film also has useful a purpose in exhibiting the work of the Junior Commission to future contributions from donors.

Meeting the Junior Commissioners in person for the first time, and listening to the young people discuss their research in detail, left the academic mentors feeling apprehensive as to how the proposed film could be achieved in such a short time. The research projects were diverse and the Commissioners had different expectations as to how their research findings should be presented to the wider audience. Initial concerns were quickly forgotten and students engaged with the film-making processes. However, some Commissioners expressed concerns that the film would not adequately showcase their findings and reflect the volume of work involved in their research.

There are many barriers to participation when involving young people in social research (Jones, 2004). Discussions with the Junior Commissioners highlighted *time* and *adult's perception of children's research* as the most significant barriers encountered. As part of their independent research strategies, the majority of the students sent out questionnaires but received limited responses; however, many adult researchers also experience a poor response when using this methodology. The Junior Commissioners also stated that it would have been beneficial to have known at the outset of the research that they would be required to produce a film presenting their findings. However, in the opinion of one of the Academic Mentors the challenging task of producing a film, provided valuable experience to all involved in the process.

It seems the Junior Commissioners were hoping to gain from the benefit of our knowledge about research processes. However, in hindsight we may have learnt more from the experience than they did. Young adults have a different thought pattern to older adults, and do not get over concerned with the right and wrong aspects of the questions they want to ask. Therefore the research projects they compiled had an 'innocent' non-structural approach to them. They seem to have the ability to think 'outside the box': it can be argued that this is a concept most adults have lost. The making of the film was an exciting way to show the efforts the Junior Commissioners. Not only were their individual research projects on film for all to see, but they learnt the skill of combining their efforts to fit in with the other Commissioners which enabled the film to flow. They worked to deadlines and condensed their research into

3 minute slots with the greatest of ease. Here again they did not get bothered by trivial problems which could have held up the finished film.

Finally, reflecting on the process and outcomes, Cath Lambert states the high expectation of the project was most certainly met. There were challenges but not always where expected and some of the most confident, assured young people found the unfamiliar format of film difficult to work with. They were required to be concise with complex ideas, edit their own work and think about audience and the communication of their ideas in different ways. They had to work, at times, under real pressure in a media they were not used to. Some of the young people were shocked that they were expected to be so 'hands on' and learn the skills of filming and editing as well as the more 'academic' skills they were already competent (such as discussion, reading and writing). We all had to think and work in energetic and embodied ways, working in different locations all over campus, contending with the weather, negotiating other people and public spaces, managing to think quickly and creatively, individually and as a team. Although often neglected from formal discussion, the physical and emotional aspects of research and teaching/learning are important and this mode of working brought them to the fore. The professional input from other members of the university (Emily Little and Robert O'Toole) in helping us film and edit was incredible, and added a new dynamic to the research team; our roles and expertise were tipped on their head.

During the week working with the Junior Commissioners the Academic Mentors were able to recognise the value of young people as researchers. The experience gained though helping with the IGGY project will hopefully help the academic mentors with future research and provided invaluable experience in any future work with young people.

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