Children and teachers as co-researchers in Indian primary English classrooms

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About the authors

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Rama Mathew has just retired as Professor of Education from the University of Delhi. She was Dean of the Faculty of Education during 2012–14 and has directed many ELT projects in India. She was Head of the Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the English in Action project in Bangladesh in 2015. She has been involved in several teacher development initiatives including 'Portfolio Assessment' and 'Diary Writing' within a teacher-as-researcher framework, and published articles and books in the area. Her interests also include language assessment, the Continuing Professional Development of teachers, and making English accessible to learners online.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deep sense of gratitude to all the teachers and their young co-researchers for their contributions, without which the project reported on here would not have been possible:

- Abu Irfan, Kolkata
- Anirudha Rout, Balasore, Odisha
- Bhavani, P., Bangalore
- Esther Gloria Sahu, Delhi
- M. Fatima Parveen, Hyderabad
- Pavan. S.R., HD Kote, Mysore
- Pritinder Kaur, Chandigarh
- Priya Minz, Hazaribag, Jharkhand
- Rachel P. Parmar, Anand, Gujarat
- Ranjani Shankar, Delhi
- Reetika Wadhawan, Panipat, Haryana
- Sharada, M., Delhi
- Sonika Gupta, Delhi
- Sudeshna Dutta, Kolkata
- Sushma Chaturvedi, Hyderabad
- Usha Malhan, Delhi
- P. Vinayadhar Raju, Karimnagar, Telangana

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Executive Summary

This is a summary report of a British Council ELT Research Partnership project entitled *Children and teachers as co-researchers in Indian primary English classrooms*, undertaken in 2015.

This is an entirely new type of study within ELT, which entered formerly uncharted territory, and thus the project was framed as exploratory. The main aims of the project were to find out both learners' and teachers' views about implementing the concept of 'children as co-researchers' based on Kellett's (2010) classification of types of research involving children.

The specific research questions were:

What do children *think about* learning English and acting as co-researchers in Indian primary schools?

- What do they like and enjoy about learning English?

- What do they want to change about their English classes?

- What would they like to explore in their English classes?

What are teachers' views about working with children as co-researchers?

- What are the benefits?

- What are the challenges?

The project was undertaken in India using a variety of data collection methods. A set of three workshops were organised to enable 25 teachers to explore their own classrooms in action research cycles focusing on involving their learners as co-researchers. All teachers kept diaries and gave presentations at the workshops and both teachers and learners were also interviewed. Secondary data sources included materials (such as posters, puppets, or books written by the children), activities produced by learners in class, and audio or video recordings of classroom episodes. There were two types of project undertaken in classrooms depending on the circumstances and the local levels of support available to each teacher. Some teachers simply elicited children's voices and opinions and this led to more engagement with learning, more meaningful choices and children taking on more responsibility for their own learning. At the other end of the continuum some learners were enabled to undertake an actual inquiry into a matter of interest to them, through using questionnaires or interviews, for example.

The data indicate overall that the project was an overwhelmingly positive experience for both teachers and learners. In fact none of the teachers who embarked on this project dropped out, which shows their incredible commitment to the core idea of working with children as co-researchers. In terms of the positive outcomes and benefits, there is a great deal of agreement across the data sets drawn from learners and teachers. Learners as well as teachers enjoyed the fact that learners' views were sought, elicited and taken seriously. Teachers were genuinely surprised by the fact that learners behaved responsibly and maturely when they had the chance to find things out for themselves. Children commented on their renewed interest in English because it became more real, more meaningful and more relevant to their own lives.

Children:

- Children shared their views about what type of English language learning they wanted and enjoyed. They selected meaning-focused activities (such as stories, bilingual writing, puppets, poetry) and communicative tasks (such as interviewing peers).

- They commented on the important role of the teacher in their learning.

- The children noticed that when they were invited to discover knowledge for themselves in their classrooms, they started to participate fully, made decisions for themselves and worked in collaboration with others.

- The children commented on the importance of being able to voice their views, being independent and being able to learn for oneself.

Teachers:

Teachers all enjoyed seeing their children's confidence, and in some cases language proficiency in English grew during the project.

- They commented on the fact that their classrooms transformed into learning contexts where high levels of engagement and participation were the norm.

- Teachers reported the growth of independence in their learners.

- Teachers reported a close bond, and better and less hierarchical relationships between learners and themselves.

- Many teachers reported lasting changes in their perceptions and beliefs about children and learning.

- Some challenges were reported such as lack of support from colleagues, headteachers or parents, lack of time, and finally, a lack of confidence regarding their own understanding of research and the concept of children as co-researchers.

Based on the research findings the following recommendations are made:

- Primary school children can productively be encouraged to work alongside their teachers as active participants/co-researchers.

- Teachers should consider eliciting children's views and opinions and giving them more responsibility to make choices and decisions in their English classes.

- Implementing projects like this should involve a careful negotiation of possibilities and restrictions in different schools with the involvement of all stakeholders.

- A workshop-based action research project worked well in this format, which could be considered for future work with other groups of teachers.

The actual classroom materials and projects that the children engaged in will be written up in another British Council publication (Mathew and Pinter forthcoming).

Contents

1

Introduction

This paper reports on the outcomes of an ELTRP UK (2015) project which was focused on Indian primary English teachers working with children as co-researchers in their classrooms. This is a largely unexplored area of enquiry and type of research in our field and thus the project was framed as exploratory.

The main aims of the project were to find out both learners' and teachers' views about working in this way in various, mostly under-resourced classrooms in India, and to uncover children's more general perceptions about their English language learning experience.

The research questions therefore targeted both learners and teachers:

What do children think about learning English and about acting as co-researchers in Indian primary schools?

- What do they like and enjoy about learning English?

- What do they want to change about their English classes?

- What would they like to explore in their English classes?

What are teachers' views about working with children as co-researchers?

- What are the benefits?

- What are the challenges?

2

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The number of children learning English around the world has been increasing at an unprecedented pace (Enever, 2011) and yet relatively little research within ELT and applied linguistics has been conducted in classrooms with children (Rixon and Smith, 2010; Smith and Knagg, 2012) although overall the amount of research focused on English for Young Learners (EYL) is slowly increasing. Current EYL research is largely adult-dominated and almost no research considers the perspectives of young learners themselves (Pinter, 2011).

Yet, for decades, research that seeks to find out about children's views and perspectives has been popular in other fields of enquiry, such as sociology, anthropology or education (e.g. Christensen and James, 2008). In contrast to traditional research rooted in developmental psychology, such sociological research aims to explore children's lives and perspectives more with a focus on their current perspectives as children rather than as a stage en route to adulthood. Children in such research are described as 'social actors' (Christensen and Prout, 2002), and for the last few decades proponents of 'Childhood Studies' have been exploring how children can be given opportunities to exercise their participation rights in all matters that affect their everyday lives (UNCRC, 1989).

2.2. Research *on* children, *about* children, *with* children and *by* children

Within the emerging tradition of 'Childhood Studies' an interesting line of work, especially in the UK, has focused on exploring methods of research with children and understanding how children can become actively involved themselves in all stages of the research process (Mayall, 2013: 22).

Kellett (2010) suggests that research that involves child participants can be carried out in four different ways. The first and most traditional way is research 'on' children. In this kind of research children are passive, unknowing objects and the research undertaken is entirely adult-motivated and adult-focused. Children are often not aware of what is going on and why. Typically, this type of research is intended to gather information about large numbers of children and the focus is on trends, averages and general patterns of behaviour. The second type of research is 'about' children. Here, smaller numbers of children are of interest and adult researchers make efforts to explain the research to the child 'subjects' as they are genuinely interested in the children's unique perspectives and views. However, these projects 'about' children are still entirely adult-motivated and adult-controlled and all decisions and outcomes are generated by adults.

The third way of undertaking research is 'with' children. This involves a perspective shift whereby adults acknowledge that they need to consult children to be able to access their views and acknowledge them as 'experts' of their own lives. In this kind of research children are partners or co-researchers and they can take/share some decisions in the research project with the adults. This collaboration ensures that children's perspectives are taken into account and the research does not entirely rely on adult conceptions. Finally, the fourth type of research is 'by' children themselves. This kind of research is conducted by children who are motivated to explore issues of interest to them, and who often work independently on their own projects, having acquired some research training (e.g. Kellett, 2005). Space does not allow us here to review the existing literature on child researchers and co-researchers but we can report that, overall, children enjoy these roles and find the process of becoming involved in research highly motivating because of the ownership they develop through active participation. Children also regularly bring compelling views and evidence to the table which contrasts with and challenges adult views (e.g. Coppock, 2010, Moore et al, 2008, Pinter and Zandian, 2012). Children also benefit by developing their self-esteem and by learning transferrable skills.

In our project we wished to explore the third option above, *'research with children'*, that is, inviting children to become co-researchers alongside their teachers. Only a handful of other studies in ELT so far have attempted to engage children as social actors and all these studies were small-scale, outside-class, and typically conducted by academic researchers rather than teacher-researchers (Kuchah and Pinter, 2012, Pinter and Zandian, 2012, Pinter, Kuchah and Smith, 2013; Pinter and Zandian, 2014). So, in this project we wanted to turn our attention to classes

where teachers were going to explore their own practice. We were interested to see how and how far teachers were interested in engaging children in their classroom explorations, how the learners were going to respond, and how this way of collaborating was going to work, if at all, being embedded in everyday teaching.

2.3. What kinds of roles can children take as co-researchers?

How does one start with the idea of working with children as co-researchers? Clearly, this needs to be a gradual process rather than a decision/action that can be implemented overnight. The process may start with smaller roles and then over time children may become interested in engaging more 'deeply' in the process of research (the final stage is often referred to as *'deep participation'*, where children take an active part in all stages of the research process (Ansell et al, 2012, Horgan, 2016)).

Interested learners can gradually take more and more responsibility for different parts of the research process, slowly moving forward as far as the circumstances allow (as explained below in terms of three stages), depending on the choices they can make, the time available, the teacher's/adult's experience and expertise, and potentially on many other factors:

- Stage 1: Learners as active participants who are aware and interested to contribute.

- Stage 2: Learners as active participants who have spent some time working alongside adults/ teachers and take responsibility for various aspects of the research process.

- Stage 3: Learners as fully fledged researchers taking full control of the process.

Learner involvement can typically involve a range of different activities, such as the following:

- Providing input leading to novel research questions (e.g. Kuchah and Pinter, 2012).

- Designing data collection tools for other children (e.g. Zandian, 2015).

- Interviewing other children (e.g. Coppock, 2010).

- Helping with analysis and writing a report (e.g. Kellett et al, 2004).

In this project we were flexible and did not prescribe exactly how the teachers were to start the process of working with learners as co-researchers. They were all invited to consider their own circumstances and act accordingly. We were interested to see how far teachers and learners were going to progress on the continuum from minimal to more sophisticated child involvement, or from weaker to stronger forms of child involvement in the process of classroom exploration.

Classrooms in India vary in size a great deal but it is fair to say that a large majority of children who are learning English are currently in under-resourced, large classes. The amount of research targeting such circumstances (e.g. Kuchah and Smith, 2011, and Garton et al, 2011) has remained inadequate, and Smith (2011) has identified teacher-research as a particularly important means by which appropriate methodology can be developed for such situations. Aside from contributing to the EYL and teacher-research fields, then, we were also particularly interested to find out whether 'researching with children' could work as a pedagogical solution in itself in these types of classroom.

2.4. Teacher-research

Research can be particularly relevant and useful when it is based on issues that practitioners identify and want to focus on. Indeed, teachers can be researchers themselves. Engaging in practitioner research can be time-consuming but it is also motivating and empowering (Borg and Sanchez, 2015). Classroom research can take many shapes and forms, but one of the most popular types is Action Research (AR), which involves both action and research in a powerful combination (Burns, 2009). AR follows repeated cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. The power of AR lies partly in the practitioner's control over what aspects of professional practice need addressing. The ultimate aim is to bring about change/improvement in the classroom (Richards, 2003). Whilst action research has been a popular choice for teacher-researchers, other forms of classroom investigation have also been proposed. Followers of the 'Exploratory Practice' (EP) approach (Allwright, 2003) suggest that AR can be too demanding for teachers and a 'looser' exploratory approach is offered instead where teachers and learners reflect on and investigate their classrooms together to make the quality of life better for everyone. More recently, Smith (2015) has proposed engagement in *Exploratory* Action Research, particularly in relatively difficult circumstances. In this approach teachers are encouraged to take a sufficiently long time to reflect on and explore their current practice rather than dive straight into action. Such initial exploration gives teachers a better/more informed basis for change. This approach is also relatively organic or 'ecological', taking into account restrictions (e.g. time limitations) on teachers' freedom to research in many contexts.

2.5. Teacher-child collaboration in research

If research is something that children can also be encouraged to be involved in, and if we are interested in children gradually taking on more and more responsibility as co-researchers, then it follows that in this collaborative process both teachers and children will be learning more and more about research itself. For teacher/adult participants, this may mean moving forward to explore new ways of doing research, perhaps also reading academic research and/or sharing more about their experiences with like-minded people at conferences. For children, if they stay interested and motivated to work with adults/teachers as co-researchers, there will similarly be a journey from less involvement and less sophisticated understanding about research to more involvement and deeper understanding, i.e. from weaker to stronger forms of participation.

3

Research Design

This was a qualitative study which aimed to collect data from both learners and their teachers to understand children's perceptions of English language learning and both teachers' and children's experiences of working together as co-researchers. Three workshops were planned for teachers (see Table 1 below) in order to enable them to set up action research projects in their own classrooms in which children would act as co-researchers.

This section describes the data collection procedures and gives a chronological overview of the study.

3.1. Participants

25 teachers participated in the study from different parts of India, representing a variety of school types (including both state and private schools, rural and urban schools, large and small schools and English-medium and Indian language-medium schools). The study involved over 800 children in these 25 teachers' classrooms with an age range of 6 to 16 years.

Out of the 25 teachers, 5 acted as mentors and each mentor worked closely with 4 teachers. The mentors had been involved in a pilot study in 2014 prior to the main phase, which started in February 2015. The mentors had been selected from a group of experienced teachers as volunteers. Essentially all mentors in the pilot phase had been involved in at least one cycle of trying out some ideas related to working with children as co-researchers before the other 20 teachers joined the project in 2015.

3.2. Action research with a focus on working with children as co-researchers

An action research framework was introduced to the teachers because in the pilot study, and even prior to that, the 5 mentor teachers had already completed action research projects (Mathew et al, 2012), were familiar with the benefits and the challenges of action research and therefore were in an ideal position to mentor others on an ongoing basis.

All teachers kept diaries during the whole project. While the diaries remained private, the teachers relied on these day-to-day reflections a great deal to prepare presentations they gave in the workshops. Apart from recorded presentations, further data

included interviews conducted during workshops with mentors, teachers and children. In addition, secondary data were collected in the form of posters made by teachers and children, materials, worksheets, craftwork produced in classrooms (such as, for example, class newspapers, child questionnaires, cartoon stories, books written by children, puppets or surveys).

Figure 1: Examples of children's work
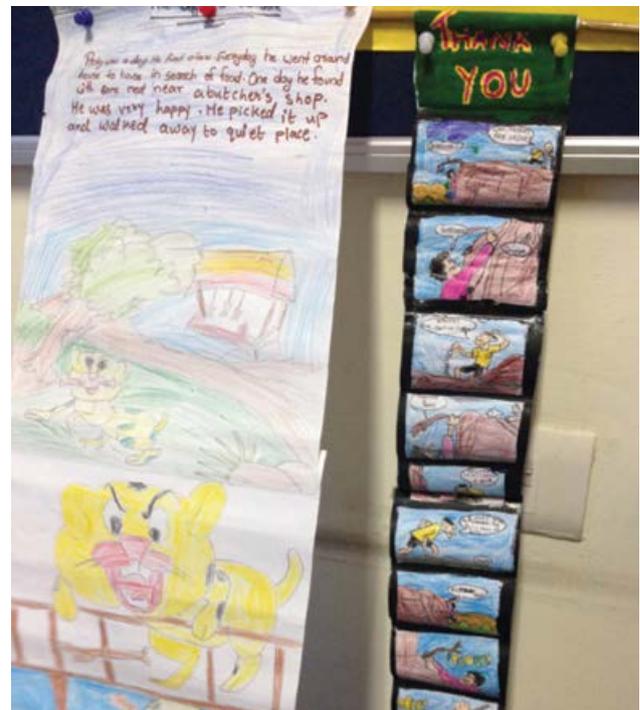
3.3. Two cycles and three workshops

Table 1: The following table summarises the main content of each workshop.

Time and place of workshop	Focus and content of workshop
February 2015 **Workshop 1: Hyderabad**	**INTRODUCTION** • Mentor presentations about their own pilot phase experiences; • Planning/brainstorming ideas to explore in the teachers' classrooms; • Reading and discussing key articles; • Matching mentors and teachers.
September 2015 **Workshop 2: Delhi**	**TAKING STOCK AFTER PHASE 1** • All teachers and mentors bring posters and give presentations; • Reading and discussing key articles; • Consolidating work done; • Teacher interviews; • Mentor interviews; • Some (local) children attend and present with their teachers; • Outsiders attend and participate; • Planning the next steps.
February 2016 **Workshop 3: Delhi**	**TAKING STOCK AFTER PHASE 2** • All teachers prepare presentations and posters; • Some (local) children attend and present with teachers; • Outsiders attend and participate; • Child interviews; • Children write scrapbook messages/testimonials; • Planning for the future.

3.4. Interpretation and implementation of the concept: children as co-researchers

At the beginning of this project none of the teachers (apart from the five mentors) were familiar with the concept of children as co-researchers and therefore discussions around what this concept could mean in different schools and contexts were frequent both during and between workshops (via closed discussion groups on Facebook and email). The key articles that we read together and revisited in the first and the second workshops (e.g. Pinter and Zandian, 2012; Pinter, Kuchah and Smith, 2013; Coppock, 2010; Kellett et al, 2004) suggested that working with children in this way was a gradual process and everyone had to find their own way of making a start and moving forward by giving children more and more opportunities to get involved. This involved working with children as explained in the stages in 2.3 above.

After the first workshop all teachers interpreted the concept of working with children as co-researchers somewhat differently, and very importantly, they all approached it according to what was possible within their own contexts. We felt at the time that our taking a flexible approach (rather than prescribing the steps to take) was both more respectful and more contextually appropriate. Accordingly, some teachers were able, with support from colleagues and headteachers in their schools, to incorporate the work for the project into their everyday teaching, while some were only able to do 'project work' on top of their normal classes.

In terms of implementing their projects with children as co-researchers and in terms of the continuum between smaller steps and bigger steps, there seemed to be two distinct positions. The first position was related to a way of teaching where some teachers asked children for their opinions and thereby gave them more of a 'voice' in the classroom. The other position was to involve the children more actively in an actual research exercise whereby, for example, questionnaires or interviews were designed and implemented by students themselves to collect and make sense of data of interest. For example, one group decided to survey computer/internet use in their school.

Details of actual projects carried out with children will be provided in a separate British Council publication (Mathew and Pinter forthcoming). This will be an edited collection of some of the most successful projects as described by the teachers themselves.

3.5. Ethics

The original research proposal was approved by the relevant academic ethics committee at the University of Warwick. All mentors and teachers signed written consent forms. Ethical issues regarding the children's participation were discussed fully in the first workshop and sample consent forms for the children were distributed. It was agreed that teachers would take the necessary steps in their local contexts to act ethically.

4

Results

4.1. Introduction

As discussed above, we were interested in the children's views and opinions about their English learning and the kinds of classroom research they wanted to engage in. At the same time we were also interested in the teachers' views, their development and their perceived gains and challenges.

4.2. Classrooms

Most of the data discussed in this paper is based on self-reports provided by the participating children and the teachers. To contextualise these voices, however, we start by describing what we observed in the classrooms. Our descriptions here are based on informal visits to project classrooms as well as audio- and video-recorded data brought to the workshops by the teachers.

Students tended to be deeply engaged in the work they did because it interested them; it interested them because they were part of the decision-making process about what they should do and how they should do it (this was corroborated by children in their interviews): for example, in one classroom they decided to make their own puppets for the teacher to tell stories with, and they brought in lots of scrap material and started working on them. This involved everyone in class, even those who were usually silent or labelled as 'slow learners'.

In one of the classes we visited, it was observed that students were working with different things, i.e. drawings, poems, or stories depending on what *they* wanted to work on. When we talked to some children, it was clear that they knew why they were working on it and what the next step was. Clearly they enjoyed this autonomy and also recognised the responsibility that accompanied it. When children went from one storybook to another (outside the prescribed syllabus) and the parents got a bit concerned, the children explained to their parents what they were learning and how they enjoyed learning that way.

In another class, children (Grade 8) decided to think of novel ways of revising the lesson for the forthcoming exams as opposed to the repetitive and boring ways in which lessons were usually revised. They divided themselves into groups depending on how they wanted the revision to happen, discussed it in detail and arrived at a majority view, which was to

collect new pamphlets, brochures and timetables from nearby coffee shops or metro stations, for the teacher to revise grammar items such as 'to/from, on/under, below/above'. In fact the students even came up with some lesson plans for the teacher to use for revising grammar lessons. The teacher noticed that they did the work over three classes without her help/supervision, contrary to how she felt she needed to continuously monitor their work and noise level at other times.

Another important dimension concerns the way research 'topics' emerged from existing 'problems' that both the teacher and students experienced in their own contexts. For example, as very few students did holiday homework (a mandatory requirement in most schools of India) let alone enjoyed doing it, the children themselves decided together to think of topics that they found interesting to work on. This resulted in a host of topics, different for different students, which they then willingly worked on. For example:

1. Interviewing parents about how they were treated by their parents when they were young (did they also have no freedom?, were they scolded by their parents?, etc.)

2. 'No school uniform': how would it be?

3. Interviewing children who didn't go to school to get a perspective on how their own condition was perhaps better than some others.

In another class, as submitting an assignment by the deadline was usually problematic, the children 'researched' into the reasons and solutions as each one saw it. The poster that students made with the teacher based on their study is below (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Poster summarizing the project about deadlines

All these examples clearly demonstrate how children liked to take on responsibility and to make curricular and pedagogic decisions that normally the teacher was responsible for. They not only enjoyed what they did but learnt a great deal from it, such as working together, supporting each other, being critical, and thinking of next steps based on their work, alongside learning lots of English. Since the project lasted beyond an academic year, when children moved to the next class they wanted this 'research approach' to continue; this they demanded in two ways: that the same teacher continue with them or the new teacher do similar things involving them, 'like adults'.

4.3. Reported views

This section is divided into two parts: the first one is devoted to findings from the children and the second part to findings from the teachers.

All self-report and presentation data were transcribed and an inductive thematic approach was taken to analysis. Initial codes were revisited on several occasions and these were categorised into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Most of the data presented here were produced in English, except in cases where Hindi was translated into English by a research assistant. Following each quote, in brackets, either (E) or (H) indicates the original language used.

4.4. Findings from the children

With regard to the children, the following main question with three sub-questions was asked initially.

What do children *think about* learning English and acting as co-researchers in Indian primary schools?

- What do they like and enjoy about learning English?
- What do they want to change about their English classes?
- What would they like to explore in their English classes?

(1) Choice of meaningful activities

When asked about what they enjoyed and why, all children commented on the fact that during the project phase dull, bookish activities were changed to real, meaningful tasks that they were consulted on and had a choice to engage with. In terms of types of content and activities they favoured, the children opted for stories, poems, games and other meaningful tasks such as interviewing people.

Here are a few quotes to illustrate the range of activities:

> *(S: E1) I love poem writing. I enjoyed penning down my feelings in it. It could be about anything- about myself, about nature, or about someone else, about society, so I liked poetry writing the best. (E)*

> *(S: E2) I like to write stories and poems in English. We can learn a lot of things through English: self-made questions, poems, stories and interviews. (E)*

Some younger children, especially, commented on the fact that they enjoyed crafting and making things in class. In one of the resource-poor classrooms children began to collect rubbish and recycled it to make things to talk about in their English classes.

> *(S: U2) The washing machine that we made and brought to class, I liked it best. (H)*

Enjoyment also came from games and jokes and, again, making things:

> (S: U3) We enjoyed a lot. Then later we created riddles, jokes, and created games and put it all in our newspaper. We created fans, washing machines, lights and coolers. (H)

One student, below, talks about enjoying writing, especially referring to the enjoyment that comes from being able to translate something personally meaningful from Hindi into English. Bilingual writing and working bilingually emerged as a sub-category of meaningful activities in the data. Children enjoyed working with texts that were important in terms of their own identity and their own choices. Doing meaningful work in groups, based on their own choices, seemed to motivate them to learn English:

> (S: E3) I enjoyed writing the most. And I want to have this activity organized in the future. Our English has improved since earlier we used to write the paragraph in Hindi and then later translate it into English. And enjoyed the most this time in standard 8. Because this time we designed our own holiday homework ourselves and included things like a coin collection, interviews, comics, stories. (E)

Some children mentioned that they conducted interviews for their research. They had a choice about who to interview and several commented on the fact that their perceptions of the people they interviewed changed. Having talked to children in the streets who could not go to school, for example, opened their eyes to social injustice:

> (S: E5) From the interview we learnt to share the experiences of others; their predicaments/ weaknesses and we saw that we have such good friends with us, they don't even have friends and despite that they take their studies so seriously… and here we are-spending our life in an absolutely carefree way. (H)

> (S: E6) Ma'am, As we take an interview, when we take an interview, we get to know that that child is very poor and can't afford to study, we feel we ought to help- come brother, take a copy or a pencil…either you do your work or study. (E)

> (S: E3) In the interview, we get to know about people; how they live, where they live. Because we come face to face with their experiences; we get to understand about their predicaments and their life. (H)

Many children commented favourably on the change from book learning and rote learning to meaningful engagement during the project period.

(2) Teacher roles

The second important theme from the child data is that of the teacher as role model, as inspiration and as a caring educator.

For example, this learner refers to his teacher as the best teacher in his life:

> (S: E4) In class 8 when I came, I do my English work in which I made self-made questions from a book. Then I also made my holiday homework in a group. Then I did work honestly and then I made my stories and also a poem. I still wrote some paragraphs, I realize now that my English can improve. My English teacher also guides me and helps to improve my English. She is one of best English teachers of my life. (E)

Other children state that the teacher is making an effort and this is much appreciated by them. Also, the following comment refers to 'research' as a positive feature of the class that is one day going to solve problems that 'students are facing':

> (S: E9) When I came to know about this project, I am glad to know that how much teacher does efforts for students and if teachers are doing this research then one day they come to know the result. And then maybe the problems that students are facing will be solved. So I want that this project must be continued. (E)

Children commented on the actual actions of teachers. For example, this learner (one of the youngest children – aged 6) talks about the teacher giving children space and an opportunity to decide things in the classroom:

> (S: U8) And when you come, you don't give us work straight away. You ask us what we'd like to do – English, Math, etc., and you make us do that which we decide upon or specify. I like that the most! (H)

It is also clear from the data that children see their English teacher as a role model and someone whose English is worth copying or aspiring to:

> (S: U10) When Ma'am speaks English, we also wish to speak English like that. (H)

> (S: X1) Our teacher will go beyond the textbook and involve us in activities. (H)

(3) Full participation and collaboration

The third theme relates to class participation. Indian classrooms tend to be relatively hierarchical and teacher-fronted, and children commented frequently in positive terms about the fact that the general patterns of interaction/participation changed in their classrooms during the project work.

This learner, for example, comments on the importance of collaboration and an ethos where everyone is encouraged to contribute:

(S: U7) What I like best is that everyone is working together. Even those started working and taking part who earlier did not do anything. I like this most. And I like that everything is based on what we like. And I enjoy things a lot. (H)

Some children also make the connection between participation, active learning and taking control. This learner below points out that the children in her class started to participate fully and enjoyed their learning because they were able to take some control of their learning during the project.

(S: U6) Earlier we do not participate in anything. Only 2-4 students in our classes participated. One day ma-am said 'You can do it!' Then we slowly started to participate and we enjoyed it a lot. Then we ourselves thought of some new activities. We thought of making puppets. Then we made puppets together and put on a show. (H)

More active learning is also associated with being more motivated to engage in something that is perceived to be meaningful. This student explains that the source of motivation was their interest in each other's work:

(S: E11) When we started our story project, we don't have a single idea and we are not interested in it but when we have seen the stories made by the other children so I have plenty of interest and at the end I have really written the best story and with this my English is really, really improved. (E)

Even the younger children notice that collaboration has become the most important element of the classroom:

(S: U12) What I like best is, whatever it is we do, we do we do it together as Ma'am gives us all tasks to do. (H)

(4) Independence

For many children the taste of independence was the most enjoyable part of the whole process. Their sense of empowerment, the sudden realization that they can do things for themselves, was palpable. The child quoted below shares her pride when she mentions that in her class children have become so independent that they managed to present their work without the teacher at a science fair:

(S: U8) We went to the science fair. Our teacher did not go with us. She had to go to Hyderabad for some work. All the other children were with their teachers. Our teacher couldn't come and we

handled everything ourselves. We even got a medal. We were so happy. (E)

Similarly, this quote is about not needing a substitute teacher when the English teacher is absent because the children can work 'by themselves':

(S: U4) In our class all the children did not need ma'am if she was not going to come, we would request her not to send any replacements and we would just work by ourselves. I like that a lot. (E)

Other children also mention independent work as most enjoyable such as for example:

(S: E7) The textbook-based work that we get is like a burden and the work that Ma'am makes us do is interesting. It is because of these activities I am able to do better today in Class IX or X- any good work that I am doing, or our magazines- I have written stories and poems for it, it has been interesting. (E)

Finally, this quote actually contrasts the old rote learning habits with a new sense of independence and suggests that now the learners started doing things 'for themselves'.

(S: E11) Actually, when we work on our English lessons, when we were young, we did not know much English, hence we used to make many mistakes, as a result of which we used to run away from English. But when we started work on this Project and started doing activities, we stopped feeling the need to learn by rote. We have now become capable of answering questions all by ourselves. (E)

4.5. Findings from the teachers

With regard to the teachers' experiences, two main research questions were asked – about the benefits and the challenges of working with children as co-researchers.

It is important to note that this group of teachers is a very heterogeneous group. They are from different parts of India, some from state and some from private schools, some with more experience and some with much less. Three of them work as headteachers in their school and some have extensive experience of working with BA students as teacher trainers, while others are right at the beginning of their careers. All teacher data here were originally produced in English.

4.5.1. Benefits

(1) The children gained confidence as learners of English

Almost all teachers commented on the fact that their learners enjoyed the project and developed their confidence, and in some cases their proficiency in English. For example, this teacher explains how his learners improved their English as a result of working closely with stories of their own choice over a period of time:

> (T: AN) My learners have improved their language proficiency, they are not afraid of English now, so confidence is the biggest thing.

Similarly, this teacher comments that in addition to better fluency, her learners have become more motivated and more interested in English in general:

> (T: ES) They are not a little more fluent in English, they are better. Their pronunciation is better and they are doing good and taking interest in newspapers, some books, what I write, and things like that.

(2) High levels of engagement and participation

Another important theme that emerged was about the increased levels of engagement and participation in class. This finding is related to the children having the opportunity to voice their opinions and make their own choices in these classrooms.

For example, this mentor/teacher explains that her children are now used to selecting their own activities from a magazine or other materials and they are used to working together with their partners:

> (T: SO) Sitting together with their partners engaged with the magazine, choosing what to do, finding the activities.

Others commented that, while previously some children were passive and uninterested in their classrooms, since the beginning of the project having the chance to voice their opinions and choose their activities meant that everyone found something according to their abilities.

> (T: US) There is full participation in the activities, some one way some another way, one child can write in English, another can be bi-lingual, and third one can only draw. It depends on them, what they want.

This headteacher below makes the point that when his children were given the chance to contribute their views they needed to understand that all their views mattered and then they became more vocal and more confident about their own contributions:

> (T: AB) What I realized [was that] they were becoming more vocal; they are also more confident than before; they began to appreciate that there were no right or wrong; whatever they felt was important.

Many teachers reported that the children's active participation lasted well beyond the actual lessons. Some of them wanted to carry on with their 'project work' even outside English classes:

> (T: SU) Even in classes that got cancelled they wanted to work on their research work. They call it research work and they are very proud.

(3) Learners became more independent and responsible

The next theme in the data is related to children's growing ability to be responsible and how this surprised the teachers. Here, a teacher comments on the fact that he had greatly underestimated his children's ability to act in a mature manner before:

> (T: AN) I never thought that the children had that much maturity. They say, ok, ok, we can do it, with confidence, we can do it. More and more responsible they are getting.

The teacher below contrasts her children's behaviour before and after the project and comments that the children have learnt to take more responsibility:

> (T: US) Now they have started to take responsibility; earlier when I said let's play a game, freedom, there was chaos, now they take responsibility for themselves and others also.

One outcome of this development is that now these learners have changed and they feel they cannot go back to old ways of learning:

> (T: US) Students have started to explore new ideas. They can't accept anything ready-made. Ready material they can't take it, they make knowledge their own; they want to experiment with things. They have become more free and confident.

The final two quotes illustrate how children in these classes are creating learning materials independently:

> (T: VI) Initially students depend on me on every issue, later they become more independent; they want to do things on their own. This is your lesson, you will write something from this.

> (T: ES) They made up their own questions, another thing we were doing is that I was not teaching the lesson, suppose that we were going to start a new lesson, make them read the lesson themselves and

they would draft their own questions, they would answer the questions themselves;

(4) Better relationships developed between learners, and learners and teachers

Teachers frequently reported a change in their learners' approach to learning but also their relationship with the teacher. This teacher reports that the children wanted her to become their class teacher as a result of the special bond they developed:

(T: PR) 'You give us freedom and acknowledge our effort, and', they used to say, 'we want you as the class teacher next year'.

Others have commented on the change in their own attitude towards learners, such as this teacher:

(T: SO) This is not simply related to their English learning, no, it has become part of my life as a teacher, it has become a little bit, shifted my attitude towards children.

(5) I changed/grew as a teacher (professional development)

This is perhaps that richest and most prolific theme in the data set produced by the teachers. They all comment on the fact that participating in this project was an excellent experience from a professional development point of view.

This first quote illustrates that some teachers have actually changed their underlying perceptions and beliefs about children and what children may be able to do. Such a shift in beliefs may be at the core of lasting teacher-learning and genuine development:

(T: AN) Today I believe learners can be good researchers; good researchers, I strongly believe that. What next? It will be an ongoing activity in my classroom [...] it will continue as long as I am in the profession[...]. I hope it will become a part of the curriculum some day. And it will go on because the children are not letting me stop.

The next two teachers also comment on the fact that, at the beginning, 'working with children as co-researchers' was just a phrase, a concept that meant very little. However, reflecting back, there seems to have been a change in their core beliefs:

(T: SO) It was just a term for us 'children as co-researchers' but now I really believe in it. They can understand. They can be researchers and they evolve with us.

(T: TI) There is a remarkable change in the way I treat my students; so I have started giving them importance and also started asking them for voices,

I don't force them on a project.

Some teachers report on various types of change and learning that occurred during their time in the project. For example, this is a summary of a learning journey as reported by one of the mentors. She describes a complete shift in her perspective from planning for students to encouraging the students to take control:

(T: US) Even at the beginning I was planning according to the interest of the students, did lots of projects, but during that time I used to plan for students. It was, all the decisions were with me. I used to think, ok, this will be interesting for students, and then it was according to me, not according to students. The whole class was not involved.

Similarly to students becoming more confident, teachers also reported an increase in confidence levels and enjoyment:

(T: SD) I have myself enjoyed it!! Only two months; I got back my confidence as a teacher.

4.5.2. Challenges

There were of course many challenges as well. First of all, teachers faced different challenges depending on their particular circumstances in the type of school they worked in.

(1) Colleagues and heads

In many schools headteachers were enthusiastic and supportive of this project; some even wanted to send other teachers and/or came along in person to sit in on the workshops themselves. Other headteachers, however, were much less flexible or interested to the extent that some simply opposed the involvement of their staff in the project.

Similarly, some teachers reported that their colleagues took great interest in the work they were doing, but many reported that their colleagues were much less enthusiastic, and had even questioned the value of it.

One of the headteacher participants received comments from her colleagues that indicated that people really did not see the point of a headteacher participating in a project like this:

(T: RX) Now that you have been promoted to be the principal, why are you wanting to learn this, you are wasting your time: but as a leader I felt that if I do not upgrade myself I will not be able to reach down to my teachers, so that I needed to pull them up also. I wanted that they should also learn.

Unfortunately, in a few cases teachers felt so insecure and unsupported that they decided to conduct the project work either outside the curriculum hours, parallel to the regular work they were engaged in, or they simply did not mention the project to anyone.

(2) Lack of time, tight curricula and parents

Time pressure, exams and parents were also mentioned by several teachers as obstacles to project work.

This teacher, even though she has managed to deal with the challenge, acknowledges that explaining it to parents is extra work:

> *(T: SO) Time is an issue. In my school we have to decide things together; Expectations from parents to speed up and cover the syllabus; it was something new for parents as well, so through PTA I started to work with parents.*

(3) Grappling with the concept of children and co-researchers

Many teachers commented on the fact that at the beginning they were unsure about how to start. This teacher/mentor reports that she decided right at the beginning to access children's views and give them some choices. She was apprehensive and she admits that she was not sure it was going to work. Yet now she reports that her children responded with sensible ideas, choices and decisions.

> *(T4: SO) I started with this choice, what do you want to do, tell me. There was also this apprehension: When you ask children what you want to do, why should they say study? Let's play! So that was my apprehension related to this choice but again and again I realize children DO want to study English, they do want to learn it.*

Many reflected during the last workshop that at the beginning they 'did not have a clue' and the topic seemed far too ambitious:

> *(T: RX) In the first workshop I came with no clue about what the workshop would be about. I had all kinds of mixed feelings. The topic was interesting because we never thought we could use children as researchers.*

> *(T: DB) In Hyderabad: Lots of questions in my head: Children as researchers? Too young to be researchers?*

Others reflected at the end that their previous understanding of research was perhaps too academic and narrow in focus and it took time to understand what action research was and what it meant to encourage children to become researchers:

> *(T11: AB) When I started it was a little difficult for me when things were discussed about research, so what we knew about research was quite different from what we were talking about; and some of the examples that were presented; so I was a little confused whether it was like activity based learning, or it was like some REAL research; till R ma-am explained that academic research is quite different from this action-based research.*

5

Summary and Implications

The data indicate overall that the project was an overwhelmingly positive experience for both teachers and learners. In fact none of the teachers who embarked on it dropped out, which shows their great commitment throughout to the core idea of working with children as co-researchers. In terms of the positive outcomes and benefits, there is a great deal of agreement across the learners and the teachers. Learners as well as teachers enjoyed the fact that learners' views were sought, elicited and taken seriously. Teachers were genuinely surprised by the fact that learners behaved responsibly and maturely when they had the chance to find things out for themselves. Children commented on their renewed interest in English because it became more real, more meaningful and more relevant to their own lives.

Summary of findings

Children:

- Children shared their views about what type of English language learning they wanted and enjoyed. They favoured meaning-focused activities (such as stories, bilingual writing, puppets, poetry) and communicative tasks (such as interviewing peers).

- They commented on the important role of the teacher in their learning.

- The children noticed that when they were invited to discover knowledge for themselves in their classrooms, they started to participate fully, made decisions for themselves and worked in collaboration with others.

- The children commented on the importance of being able to voice their views, being independent and being able to learn for oneself.

Teachers:

- Teachers all enjoyed seeing their children's confidence and in some cases language proficiency in English grow during the project.

- They commented on the fact that their classrooms were transformed into learning contexts where high levels of engagement and participation became the norm.

- Teachers reported a growth of independence in their learners.

- Teachers reported a close bond, and better and less hierarchical relationships between learners and themselves.

- Many teachers reported lasting changes in their perceptions and beliefs about children and learning.

- Some challenges were reported, such as lack of support from colleagues, headteachers or parents, lack of time, and finally, a lack of confidence regarding their own understanding of research and the concept of children as co-researchers.

Implications

- Whichever form (weaker or stronger) of the concept of working with children as co-researchers was implemented, both teachers and learners enjoyed the process and benefited in many ways.

- In its weaker form, working with children as co-researchers tended to start with a question posed by the teacher: 'What would you like to do in English classes?' and children, to the teachers' surprise, responded with much maturity and showed that they were capable of selecting meaningful activities for learning. Some of the children's choices reflected a growing social awareness. Children also enjoyed their independence.

- Giving children voice and choice led to increased levels of participation in class and better relationships between learners and teachers.

- In its stronger form, where children were actually undertaking some sort of investigation (usually using questionnaires and interviews), the whole process led to a great deal of learning and to children developing a strong sense of ownership and pride in the research.

- The creation of an active learning community among all involved in the project involving face-to-face contact and the opportunity to learn from others in a non-judgmental environment where everyone acted as equals, seemed to act as a catalyst to learning and professional development.

Based on this project a number of recommendations can be made:

- **Primary school children can productively be encouraged to work alongside their teachers as active participants/co-researchers.**

- **Teachers should consider eliciting children's views and opinions and giving them more responsibility to make choices and decisions in their English classes.**

- **Implementing projects like this should involve a careful negotiation of possibilities and restrictions in different schools with the involvement of all stakeholders.**

- **A workshop-based action research project worked well in this format, which could be considered for future work with other groups of teachers.**

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