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## Primary school students as co-researchers

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*Published in:*

Proceedings of the 2nd Association for Visual Pedagogy Conference

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Otrell-Cass, K., Bruun, M. H., & Gnaur, D. (2017). Primary school students as co-researchers. In K. Otrell-Cass (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 2nd Association for Visual Pedagogy Conference* (1 ed., pp. 118-122). Dafolo Forlag A/S. Undervisning og læring [http://www.avpc2017.aau.dk/digitalAssets/307/307703\\_f-0998-avpc-indmad\\_nypdf-1.pdf](http://www.avpc2017.aau.dk/digitalAssets/307/307703_f-0998-avpc-indmad_nypdf-1.pdf)

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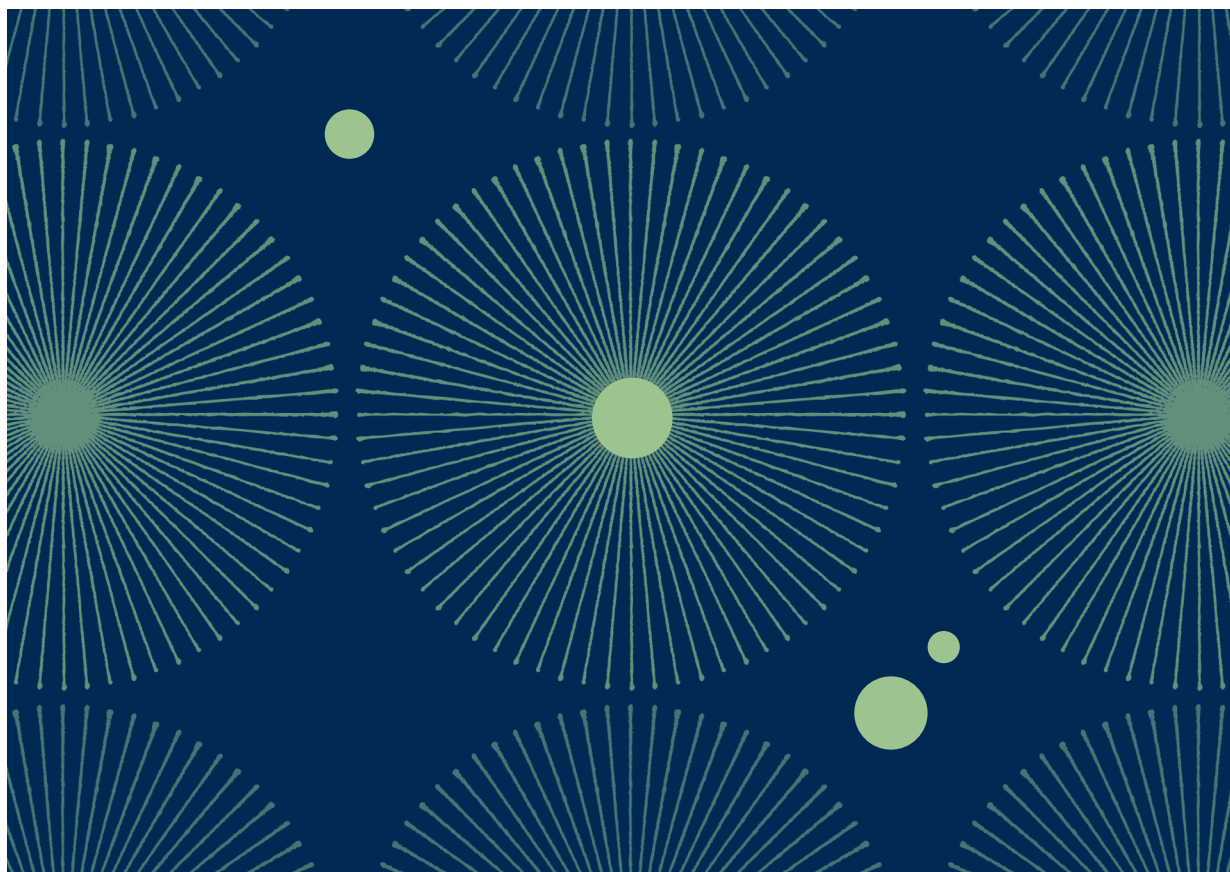
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Proceedings of  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Association for  
Visual Pedagogy Conference



EDITED BY KATHRIN OTREL-CASS



Edited by Kathrin Otrell-Cass

Proceedings of  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Association for  
Visual Pedagogy Conference

Kathrin Otrell-Cass (red.)

**Proceedings of the 2nd Association for Visual Pedagogy Conference**

1. udgave, 1. oplag, 2017

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Serie: Undervisning og læring

ISSN 2246-3259

ISBN 978-87-7160-659-1

# Primary school students as co-researchers

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## Introduction

Research that takes place in schools with young people assigns them in many cases to be participants that are observed and analyzed, even when the research focus is on changing the conditions at school to their advantage. Research that examines how young people experience education often fails to give adequate prominence to children's voices apart from using their words from transcripts of observations or interviews. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) points out the importance to uphold children's rights in diverse educational contexts, and this challenges ethical, methodological, legal and pedagogical issues that arise at the crossroads of children's rights and educational contexts, especially if the focus of research is on how to think and practice differently.

## Children's voice in research

The notion of 'student voice' has gained general acceptance over the past decade. Voice suggests a particular point of view, one that is not universal because children don't speak as one but as individuals (Thomson, 2008). Part of the thrust of including student voice is about enabling professionals who have traditionally worked 'on', or on behalf of, young people to move towards working with them to improve their quality of life, and educational experience and attainment (Noyes, 2005). Student involvement in research is however not unproblematic (Lodge, 2005). Researchers hold a range of views about the extent to which young people should, or can, be empowered as participants in the research process. The nature of the methods that best support students to express their thoughts and feelings is another issue to be considered. How to present and represent data that is generated by students is a concern given that professionals, including teachers, school leaders and policy makers, are not always willing to listen to and act on data from students, particularly when they are being critical (Hadfield & Haw, 2001). Here we are reporting about a project on students' use and ownership questions to do with Bring Your Own Devices (BYODs). We are working with the collection of visual data, in particular from videos that have been collected by researchers and by students during re-

searcher/student meetings, during classroom observations and doing children's school breaks, and at home. However, this visual data does not speak for itself (Lesh & Lehrer, 2000) but is an effective means for mediating students' reflections and researcher-student conversations contributing distinctive insights into students' ideas. As such visual information can help to tell 'unsayable stories' (Leitch 2008, p.37) and provide rich accounts that help to better understand children's lives and ideas.

## Contemplating 'student voice'

A number of reasons have spurred researchers to take account of student ideas and experiences. One of these is the increasing recognition that children are authorities on their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2001; Mayall, 2000). This view is eloquently summarized by Prout and James (1997) who argue that children need to be viewed as social actors in their own right, not just people in the process of becoming so. The school improvement movement has consulted widely with students on the basis that they provide unique perspectives and are expert witnesses to their own lives (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). So too have researchers with an interest in democratic schooling (Apple & Beane, 2007). Overlaying this work, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides a political imperative to consult with children. It states that children have the right to actively participate in all matters concerning them. Given, that students are the intended beneficiaries of schooling their involvement in educational matters would seem essential. Indeed, Levin (2000) argues that education reform 'cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects'. All the more so given information on student views has been shown to be influential in mobilizing teacher change and parent opinion in favour of reform. This said, the extent to which students participate actively within the research process varies in terms of whether the research is on, for, with and by students. The boundaries between these positions are often blurred but, broadly speaking, the focus of discussions at one end of this continuum tends to be on the nature of the methods that support students to express their thoughts and feelings. At the other end of the continuum, some researchers advocate students-as-researchers and children as co-researchers (Milstein, 2010; Thomson & Gunter, 2007).

## Findings

We report about an ongoing research project that is currently on the way in three countries, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. In this presentation, we will refer only to examples of the Danish study. This project that is funded through Nordplus Junior intends to identify the practices, and appropriateness of use when primary school students bring their own devices (BYOD) to school. Such technology includes computers and any kind of smart technology (phones, tablets), but also cameras, digital watches and any applications that such devices may be using to access information or collect data. We are also interested in how school-owned technology is used to connect with such devices including if the technology is used to collect information from students. To examine those interests, it has been our aim to involve primary school students (grade 7, 12 years) in our study as co-researchers. So far, we have taken several steps including a meeting with them and their families and the teachers and a joint research day. During the research day, the students were tasked to examine our research questions to identify what they find worthwhile investigating. The students have so far produced videos to share their stories about how they use mobile phones. We also asked them to wear GoPro cameras during their lunch breaks and sat together with them to identify what aspects of their own practices could be used for research and why they could be insightful. We are under no illusion that this project has been shaped by researchers' and teachers' interests and categories (James, 2007) and that students have acted within the bounds of defined school community practices. However, we can see how the deliberate attempt to give young people voice in research gets a step closer to co-constructing knowledge and reduce researcher dominated over or under interpretation of events and what can be seen and observed in the field.

## Preliminary Conclusion

The deliberate attempt to work closer with young people creates the need to identify different opportunities for dialogue between researchers and students. We are interested in creating opportunities for students to draw on their own interpretations about their lives. This, we believe may create the opportunities for dialogue that expands on monolithic adult explanations of children's worlds. The accommodation for including young people's experiences, ideas and interests is not easy and cannot be achieved by assuming that adults know about children's lives simply because they once were children too. We find that video may open up the possibility to allow for individual knowledge sharing,

unexpected insights and creative ideas to include young people's experiences, feelings and how they see themselves operating amongst adults.

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