

Research Briefing No. 24

Students As Researchers: The StAR Project

Key findings and implications for Policy Makers

The StAR project is one element of the University of Bristol's SUPI (Schools-University Partnerships Initiative) programme. SUPI is funded by RCUK (Research Councils UK) from January 2013 for three years. SUPI aims to facilitate engagement between schools and universities, and to raise the aspirations and awareness of students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds towards research.

The StAR project aimed to assist young people to develop their understandings of social science research through direct engagement in student-led projects, with them acting as knowledge producers. This innovative approach to working with young people as researchers in their own right had the following implications:

- The young people engaged in all aspects of the research projects, taking on board advice and new understandings of research methods and challenges which they found empowering and exciting.
- The project was more successful because of the sustained commitment of the school and teachers involved.
- University researchers acted as strong, positive role models through the development of personal relationships with the students over time.
- Benefits for postdoctoral researchers included experience of initiating and collaborating over a partnership project with schools and establishing themselves as early career researchers



The research

The StAR project took place between September 2013 and June 2014 in partnership with King's Oak Academy, Bristol which is part of the Cabot Learning Federation. In line with the larger aims of SUPI, the project aimed to raise students' awareness of what research is, the role of universities in conducting research and to consider post-16 education, including seeing research as a career option.

14 students were involved in the project from across Years 7 to 10. They worked collaboratively in 4 small groups, with a postdoctoral researcher from the university allied to each group. Students undertook their own research projects. This actively involved them in:

- Deciding the research focus and questions
- Selecting methods of inquiry to be adopted
- Conducting data collection and data analysis
- Formulating key findings
- Presenting the research to several audiences

The project was led by Dr Sue Timmis, Director of the PhD Programme and Centre Co-ordinator for the Centre for Learning, Knowing and Interactive Technologies, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. The postdoctoral team included Dr Emma Bent, Dr Vanda Papafilippou, Dr Perry Walters and Abi'odun Oyewole (PhD researcher).

Mr Simon Jones, a Specialist Leader in Education for the Cabot Learning Federation was the co-ordinator of the project for King's Oak Academy.

Research design

The students involved in the project volunteered after a whole school introduction to the project by a member of school staff. These 14 students were then interviewed by the research team prior to Christmas 2013, actively engaging them with the research process from the outset. Ten sessions took place approximately fortnightly. These encouraged and offered opportunities for:

- Student engagement in contemporary research - both their own and that of the university researchers.
- A visit to the University and Graduate School of Education. The visit included a session with the Education Librarian and a tour of the historic buildings including the Great Hall where degrees are conferred

Students and researchers also presented to key practitioners at a Cabot Learning Federation event, and at the Festival of Education at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol in June 2014.

Further information

The research questions for the students' projects were:

1. How do parents put pressure on their children and how do they react?
2. How does music influence people's learning?
3. Do the school's facilities affect learning?
4. Does having more than one teacher in a subject have a negative impact on students' learning?

The StAR project piloted possibilities for research engagement between universities and schools, developing an innovative approach to research with young people working as researchers. We aim to extend the research to explore this model of co-produced research between school students and researchers, in particular with schools in more disadvantaged communities

Contact

Dr Emma Bent.

Email: emma.bent@bristol.ac.uk **Phone:** 0117 928 7055.