



Empowering children as active researchers



Dr. Mary Kellet - director of the Children's Research Centre (CRC) at the Open University in Great Britain

By Mona Abdelfattah

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Mary's primary research interest is empowering children as active researchers. A former primary school teacher and social worker, Mary is Programme Director for Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University. Other research includes work with children and young people who have learning difficulties.

Education for a New Era magazine recently extracted an interesting interview conducted with Mary Kellett from the Education Institute's Teachers Network web site which focuses around the theme of this special edition. Mary is the director of the Children's Research Centre (CRC) at the Open University in Great Britain and member of the steering committee of the Education Institute's Research Skills Development Unit. She has played a leading role in developing the Centre, which supports children to undertake their own research, offering training to children and teachers in research skills. The Centre explores and evaluates different training delivery models and provides a dissemination platform for children's research.

Q1: How do you think that the education reform in the State of Qatar can benefit from projects carried out by the CRC?

Part of the Education Reform initiative here in Qatar is to develop research skills in Independent schools. This is what the CRC has been doing

for the past 5 years and now has a website featuring about 70 original research studies by children. When you start out on something new, it is always valuable to be able to draw on others' prior experience. The CRC has developed a training programme specifically for children and this can be used as a platform on which to

create a research training programme that is culturally appropriate for Qatari students. Research projects that CRC children have carried out can be studied by teachers and students here in Qatar to explore the range and scope of topics reflecting children's interests and concerns e.g. studies about the environment, social issues and children's school experiences. They demonstrate that children as young as 9 can carry out valuable research if they have appropriate training and support. This will give a level of confidence to the Qatari research initiative that much can be achieved at all ages.

Q2: How important do you see research skills for the development of independent life-long learners?

Research skills are crucial to life-long learning. They develop valuable critical thinking skills, foster creativity, encourage problem solving and promote sceptical analysis. Having to work with self-generated data develops organization and management skills and presenting research is a wonderful way to polish communication skills. Most importantly engaging in research nurtures independent learning. All of these are life skills which we need if we are to function optimally in society. These skills will help students do their future jobs more proficiently, be better citizens, adopt problem-solving approaches to life, make ethical decisions and be skeptical about commercial promotions and media spin.

Q3: You are the author of How to Develop Children as Researchers, a step-by-step how-to book for teachers. Are there any requirements for teachers to engage in the project of enhancing pupils' research skills?

The Research Development Skills Unit, supported by a team of excellent teachers from Qatari schools, is designing a culturally appropriate research programme to help teachers work with students in their schools. This is going to be a fantastic resource and a great help



for any teacher. However, delivering a training programme and supporting students with their research projects is very different from reading about it. Teachers need to be supported with 'hands-on' training workshops where they can engage with the practicalities of programme delivery and explore how to adapt materials to suit their own individual students' needs. I am hopeful that training programmes will soon be facilitated for interested teachers.

Q4: As a special advisor to the Steering Committee, the oversight body for the Research Skills Development Projects, what do you see as the major obstacles that the project will have to face during the implementation period? How do you think that these obstacles can be overcome?

This is a very ambitious and exciting programme and, understandably, there are many obstacles to be overcome. The main obstacle is

getting quality training to teachers as this has to be done in workshops outside teaching time. We need to train a core of experts from Qatari schools who can support the roll out of this training programme. The other obstacle is being able to put together quality training materials in a short time and having them translated into Arabic. This is an important step to ensure that resources are accessible to all interested teachers in Qatar. Beyond that, I think there is an ideological battle to be won to persuade people that this is a long-term initiative which will have major benefits for Qatari students. A range of research initiatives such as elective research courses in the curriculum and after school research clubs will foster a new research culture in Qatar that will produce a generation of higher order thinkers able to compete with the best.

Mona Abdelfattah is the Managing Editor of the Teachers Network.