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Teachers Forum

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Photo by Mary Claire Carroll



Children as Community Researchers

interview
conducted
by
**Roger A.
Hart**

Claire Oglesby and students

Anyone who doubts the capacity of children to conduct research should look through the window of the little, two classroom, school in Westminster West, Vermont in the U.S.A. They will see six to ten year old children intently pursuing their different research goals all over the classroom: one glueing together a model, one making a map, one recording observations of an animal's behavior, another referring to the dictionary, perhaps a small group of children in the corner planning a new project and two children at a computer printing out the data from their study of people's consumer behavior. It's hard to know where the teacher, Claire Oglesby, will be but it's unlikely to be standing in the front of the classroom for there is no front or back to this room. She may be sitting on the couch helping some child with a map while other children interrupt with questions like, "Claire, I don't know how to make this rainfall data into a chart." This is a learning community so they are likely to get answers like: "Try talking to Adam about the chart he made last week of electricity use in town, it was like your data; and then come and see me with a plan." Claire Oglesby knows that children learn best when they are interested in a phenomenon. Perhaps this is why, after 30 years of teaching in this school, she is still so enthusiastic; she is able to share in the genuine excitement of discovery of each of her children's different research questions.

Interview with Claire Oglesby

Question: Please tell us a little about your school, your community and your job.

Answer: I teach in a small public school in Westminster West, which is a rural part of the state of Vermont. The school has two rooms with a total of 40 to 45 children aged 6 to 11 years old. I teach the younger children, aged 6 to 8 years old. I am now teaching many of the children of the parents that I taught. It's a community school where parents get involved in the school but we do have to be aware of the very long hours that some parents have to work. Many parents are self-employed or have several jobs and struggle to make a living.

Q: What would you say is most distinctive about your classroom and how you teach compared to most public schools?

A: I think that the big difference is that I really do respect the child. I don't look down on them. I consider we are working here together as equal partners but with different experiences. I feel that young children very often know what they need to learn next and what they can handle. As a teacher you're trying to expand their interests and knowledge. I find that many public school classrooms are too teacher-directed. The reason that is often given for this is that there are State curriculum requirements that have to be fulfilled. But I've found that if you look closely at these requirements, you can fulfill the required curriculum in your own ways. You don't have to teach in a standardized way – as long as your children are successful.

I try to have a classroom where there is a lot of respect between children, teachers and parents. I put a lot of the responsibility for education on the children themselves. I try to put them in positions where they want to learn things and your role is to give them the tools to get there. I also try to help children make standards for themselves so that they are not accepting someone else's standards. We don't want them saying "so and so is better than I am". We want instead to get them to look at what their own improvements have been and to celebrate these. We're very open about who can do and who cannot do certain things. That openness makes a big difference on how children see each other. Children come to see that everyone has something to work on.

Q: It's my impression that in your school your children are often carrying out research projects?

A: Right, they do research all of the time in many different ways. Often it's in the classroom using data that we have there. Or it's when they have to solve a problem that arises. Like this afternoon, a child lost a marker behind the steps so they really had to get together to work out how to get it out. But we also move out into the community. I find that parents and children often don't know how much knowledge they have. Like the [Community Atlas project](#) was marvelous. Because when they came to map their knowledge to make an atlas they discovered how much knowledge they had: they knew where all of the hayfields, ponds and cemeteries were in the community. But they hadn't ever put this knowledge together as something they knew or could use or had any value! It's really exciting for them to learn

that they know things. When they realize how much personal knowledge they have it leads them to look further; they see the world out there as something to be learned. There's a tremendous amount of pride that comes with children completing a project that was their idea, or was their family's idea – we do a lot of family research projects.

Q: Could you tell me about the idea of "family research projects"?

A: Well it started out quite a few years ago when we were arranging an exchange project between children in our town with children in Puerto Rico. We decided to focus on "earth friendly" projects. As we talked about it we thought that it would be good to have parents help with it because some children were too young to complete community research alone. So we scheduled small group meetings with two or three children and their parents at the beginning of the school year to come up with project ideas. They did the research together and the final presentation was done with the parents. The final presentation style was left to the family to decide together. We gave a range of examples of alternatives to the families. I was amazed by the variety of different ways that families did it: written booklets of course but also a play, a drawing exhibit, a photo report, a tape-recorded report and so on. There was no way that people could compare the different projects because they were all so very different. This was good because there had initially been some anxiety by parents about how their family's presentation would be compared with others.

Q: What about parents who have had very little education and are intimidated by schools?

A: Yes, that's an important question because we do have those parents. Occasionally it helps for two families to work together. Two children wanted to look at the usage of electricity. So, with their families' help they made a little survey and interviewed everyone in the community. They found that there were hundreds of electrical appliances that people had taken for granted in their homes. They really startled the community because Vermonters like to think of their state as being more careful than most about abusing the environment.

I've found that you have to find a way for parents to build on their personal knowledge in order to build confidence and trust. One family with five children originally felt that they did not have any project they could do together. Also the mother felt that she did not have the ability to be able to help much with the writing of a report. So the mother and young daughter took a video camera out to the woods and made a video of the father and grandfather using horses for logging in the woods. They had not videotaped anything before but they had fascinating scenes of the men working with the horses and an amazing interview. There was so much interesting and valuable environmental knowledge that the family had to share with the community. "Why do you still use horses?" was one of the questions and there were a number of different answers including economics, and the pleasures the horses gave to the family, but the big reason they gave was that "the woods stay the same"; the horses go through the woods but you can't tell that they have like you can with a tractor. So the family was using the environment in sustainable ways that could be shown to others. The mother couldn't believe how well the whole thing came together. The video was very popular and was shown on state television! It needn't have been video of course; this whole project could have been good as a tape-recorded report and might have interested a local radio station. (Editor's Note: As a result of this project, the family, which had never been involved in writing anything before, has now been offered funding by the Vermont Historical Society to produce further documentation of their logging work.)

When parents get really involved in research with their children they enjoy it and it improves how they then continue to work with their children's education. As a result of these kinds of experiences the less well-educated parents are equally involved in this school – helping out as volunteers on school trips, raising money for the school, bringing in their skills and finding resources for the classroom.

Roger A. Hart comments further:

There are about 24 children in this class and there is a part-time teaching assistant. The community is by no means a rich or even above average community in terms of income or education. It does, however, have the benefit of being small and it seems that as long as the teaching is good, small schools can often achieve better results and a better relationship to the community than larger schools. Also, by being a small town it has been easier to establish a working relationship with many of the institutions and residents. By remaining in the school for so long, Claire has been able to establish the respect that enables her to escape the orthodoxy of fixed lesson plans and texts that teachers commonly fall back on. It is safer to teach in a traditional way because, in the more dynamic kind of learning described here, the child is in control of much of the investigations and the teacher doesn't always know where the learning will lead.

Like many good progressive schoolteachers, Claire adopts general themes for children to be working on so that while individuals and small groups of children investigate their own projects, they do so within a larger context which can be shared between the children. Both the general themes and the specific projects which the children investigate emerge out of the children's spontaneous interests in the classroom and sometimes through children's discussions with their parents. In recent years environmental themes have grown in importance in her classroom and she has found that her children can engage in serious environmental research by working with the support of their parents, or sometimes with other neighboring adults. It must be admitted that in some schools it would be very difficult to find a willing adult to work with every child in the classroom in the way Claire Oglesby is able to do in her school. Because of the respect she commands, Claire persuades parents to play this role even though they might feel that they really don't have the time. The solution for other schools would be perhaps for the children who do not have parental support to work in small groups and for the teacher to find an adult in the community to work with these children.

No hard and fast rules are made about how parents should work with their children. This is necessary not only because of the different capacities of the children but also because of the different capacities of parents, their different styles of working with their children and the different times they have available. One young girl who had great difficulty with academic work had the chance to see that even though she herself had great difficulty with language, her mother could read and write. She was empowered, it seemed, by observing her mother carrying out work which she had not previously observed. For other children it was literally a joint activity, with parent and child conducting observations and interviews together. Other parents simply gave their enthusiastic support and sometimes provided the resources for their children to conduct their own [research](#). In all cases the project not only succeeded in connecting the school to the community environment but also in improving the connection between the parent and the school curriculum.

A comprehensive selection on Roger A. Hart's work is available at [Children as Community Researchers](#).

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