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# Youth-led social action at school: 'It made me think that there could be a way to make things better in the future'

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## Abstract

This article critically reflects on the Education Peace Project, instigated by seven young people in a northern England secondary school. It explores how this different beginning makes visible the relational, place-based approaches involved in collaborative research. We suggest schools could do more to support young people to think, talk and act on issues that concern them, by addressing deep-seated attitudes about childhood, knowledge and learning, and opening up spaces where young people can participate differently, by working collectively for meaningful change.

## Keywords

Schools, children, inquiry, participation, social action, young people

## Introduction

This article explores the youth-led Education Peace Project, designed by seven girls in a catholic secondary school to mobilise for change. It considers how they worked together with a youth worker (Terry) and academic (Deborah, first author) to develop a process of inquiry and social action and suggests how such opportunities for young people's participation in schools can provide a grounded starting point and rationale for meaningful collaborative research. The different beginning makes visible the relational, place-based approaches required to navigate complex competing contexts including the purpose of

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education, pedagogy, student voice, and facilitation of youth participation. By highlighting what struck the young people, the academic, and the youth worker, during the early stages of the project, we identify together the importance of spaces for young people to explore what interests and motivates them to work with others for change.

The academic has been privileged to observe the work of the school youth worker and to map and support young-people led projects in order to understand wellbeing impacts from participation, which a scoping review has revealed are poorly evidenced (Crook et al., 2024). Terry has decades of youth work experience in schools, youth clubs and the community. The group of school-girls who are co-authors of this article were concerned about fear and threat felt by young people, nationally and globally, but also recognised that this was to be found in their own neighbourhoods and communities, including at school. The group is known in the school as Romero Impact Action Group, encouraged by school leaders to follow the example of the catholic Saint Oscar Romero to end injustice by knowing the needs of the local people they live and work alongside, as well as around the world, using educational resources produced by CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development). They formed their group at the end of school Year 8 (aged 13) because they believed that inquiry and social action bring hope for change. At the point of writing this article, they are in Year 10 at school (aged 14-15). The action group, youth worker and academic met regularly in school to write this article, making notes and audio recordings to capture critical reflections on the project and the young people's motivations. The academic analysed and collated this into sections for drafts, then main points were agreed together, thus the young authors decided that their experiences should be presented collectively ('the group,' 'we' or 'us'). They did not want to read or write lengthy prose because they already had so much to do at school, instead they discussed and reviewed drafts.

Central to the project was 'voice' which the group suggested is about being able to speak out on what matters to them, influencing change where they can. Three had heard that the youth worker had facilitated girls community action groups with previous year groups, following a programme to address low levels of wellbeing experienced by girls (UK Youth, 2024) and wanted to organise something themselves. Whilst the school admits predominantly white Catholic families, the group includes three Muslim girls. Having what they considered are rare opportunities in school to talk openly about their roles as young women was important, and clearly a motivator for their wish to improve opportunities for voice:

As girls we understand what it is like to be silenced. We also understand that many men/boys are also silenced for other reasons. We want people to listen to everyone. That is what we hope will change.

The girls were particularly interested in organising a school-based project because they believed that wellbeing issues had become more prominent during and since the COVID-19 Pandemic and that how young people were feeling might be improved if they could express their views and feelings at school. They took a long-term view, suggesting that this must happen before children transfer from primary to secondary school (aged 11)

to change expectations about student voice. All the authors see young people as agents of change participating in peace building by inquiring and learning together, so that they can explore how to make the world a kinder, fairer, and safer place.

The type of participation involved in the project can be broadly described as inquiry and social action. The group identified with Freire's (1970) conviction that people must act for as well as talk about change. This cannot be reduced to a linear model of child participation detached from the school context, however, so the article draws out some of the detail that we consider is often overlooked in academic accounts of participation at school. The first section sets the project within the broader contexts of the substantial body of literature on student participation, also suggesting how self-determination theory may be helpful in understanding the girls' motivations to participate and the barriers involved. We then provide our critical reflections of the project in its early stages. The discussion suggests how this provides insight for developing participation at school and improving collaborative academic research.

## Theoretical underpinnings

### *What is happening in schools?*

The time that children and young people in the UK spend in school has increased in recent decades, with one of the lowest school starting ages in the world at aged 4, most in funded pre-school education one or two years before this, and a requirement to continue in some form of education until age 18. What happens at school is a major part of children and young people's everyday participation, but educational policy and practice takes little account of what this means for them. In this article, we are using participation to mean the ways that children and young people can influence their lives, those of others and the world. This is more than just turning up for school (the term participation is often used as such in the UK) or just having the opportunity to give a view in school matters. Such limited interpretation of student voice can promote westernised individualism and middle-class attributes, reinforcing social inequalities (Pearce and Wood, 2019) which Arnot and Reay (2007) warned would make it an imperative 'for researchers to explore the communicative procedures embedded in teaching and the pedagogic identities they create' (pp. 323-324). Instead we refer to a process of interacting with others, being listened to and being able to act together with others for change, big or small.

There is a substantial literature (mainly from a minority world perspective) on the narrowing focus of education in schools and the limits of student voice. Centralised government control of schooling has led to focus on prescribed, measurable content and outcomes devoid of connection with educational philosophy (Fielding and Moss, 2011). Education interventions, through scientific accounts of pedagogy, produce a 'disciplined system of control' (James et al., 1998, p. 45) but focusing on pedagogy alone can distract from societal dialogue about the purpose of education and what sort of environments might enable transformation for children and young people (Webb and Kirby, 2019). A curriculum without meaning or relevance for them can sideline human flourishing (Brighouse, 2007). In this context, tensions surrounding student voice have remained

particularly problematic and may be ignored or suppressed in schools (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012) as teachers try to deliver rigid syllabuses and metrics. This can foster passive expectations around participation, diminishing the value of children and young people's contributions (Qvortrup, 2005) and disallowing any form of challenge, either cognitively or behaviourally. This may be regarded as subversive rather than as action to change a situation (Wyness, 2000) to the point where the rights of the many in schools are used (often wrongly) to outweigh those of individuals, a situation rarely problematised (Gillett-Swan and Lundy, 2022). Children and young people's questioning may be directed to unfairness about being forced to believe a set of viewpoints or 'facts,' when there is little chance to evaluate their merit in sociological terms (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004).

How children and young people participate and the affordances of their interactions are important to their identities, interests and growth as human beings. But these are also about how they regard and cooperate with others, 'communally situated individuality as central to a democratic way of life' (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, p. 222). Children and young people readily participate with others in the deliberative spaces of peer and friendship groups (Cleaver and Cockburn, 2009). When we learn something that moves us enough to want to act we tell people about it – family, friends and others – and ideas spread. This might be considered a form of protagonism, recognised more readily in other areas of the world as an important type of participation for children and young people (Kina, 2012). However, in the UK, children and young people are rarely encouraged to speak out, argue or take action on matters they care about whilst at school. Those attending the 'Fridays for Futures' marches in 2019, for example, risked parental fines and being labelled as truants. The then UK Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds stated "...missing class won't do a thing to help the environment; all they will do is create extra work for teachers" (Inews, 2019). The National Association of Head Teachers told members to not authorise truancy advising that school leaders should decide how best to respond to any proposed protest. When young people from our secondary school attended a protest they were shouted at by adult passers-by. These attitudes towards children and young people's everyday participation are important in understanding their motivations - what they get involved in or choose not to do. Ryan and Deci (2020) suggest that efforts and commitment to agency are normative aspects of human nature that can be affected by such extrinsic factors. Their self-determination theory identifies competence, autonomy and relatedness as necessary to foster motivation, with lack of opportunity resulting in the suppression and passivity of these 'intrinsic motivation' factors.

### *Inquiry and social action*

The Education Peace Project was not conceived as an academic research study. It did not aim to advance knowledge or theory, and the young people did not have a research question or hypothesis that they wanted to investigate. They did develop plans for how they might create change by visiting primary schools, giving them funding towards making peace gardens and organising a wellbeing conference at the University. To this extent their inquiry can be defined broadly as a systematic investigation and problem-

solving activity that has helped to shape the direction for their social action. This does nevertheless have similarities to participatory action research (PAR) where a process of critical and reflective inquiry, is intended to give voice to people usually silenced, empowering them to analyse their experience so as to effect change (Bernard, 2000). PAR like participatory or critical pedagogy, enables transformational learning and resistance, for social change (Freire, 1970; Hawkins, 2015; Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). These aims were shared by the project, yet too often young people's own ways of achieving such aims are ignored or disputed as unable to meet the necessary rigour or standards of academic research. Kellett (2005) suggested that children's research could be a new paradigm enabling school students to influence policy by training them to work systematically as researchers and recognition alongside adult scholars. But training children to do research (in the academic sense) speaks to linear models of participation undermining the contributions that they can make without, and is not necessarily a motivator to participate. In Finch et al. (2023) for example, the young researcher tells us how he wanted to know about research but did not want to do the tasks that academics have spent years training for, such as writing formal texts.

Freire's (1970) conceptualisation of praxis and the idea that change is possible through critical reflection and human action, rejects such apprenticeship, by recognising that inquiry and learning are a human rather than scholarly endeavour. Education enables communities to become more aware of their situation and understand oppression, so that they can formulate action to transform this situation (Freire, 1992). Too often accounts of PAR, ignore this condition of the critical pedagogy that is supposed to underpin praxis. Whilst Freire was extremely critical of education systems that treat learning as banking of knowledge, there is more at stake than the dominance of neoliberal values. Giroux argues that 'too many classrooms at all levels of schooling now resemble a 'dead zone' where any vestige of critical thinking, self-reflection, and imagination quickly migrates to sites outside of the school' (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). Youth-led PAR can create links between young people's lives and the curriculum to transcend discriminatory beliefs (Cammarota and Romero, 2011), however, this requires adults to make available time and places to do so. The next section makes visible the relational, place-based approaches involved, through the authors' critical reflections.

## The Education Peace Project

When the group started to envisage and plan the Education Peace Project, there was a sense that children and young people had few spaces where they could really voice their concerns and work out ways to improve things. By taking time to create deliberative spaces for talking, sharing ideas and designing possible actions in schools (Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012), we (the young authors) hoped to demonstrate that this could be changed. From our reflections:

Me and the other girls hope we will not only change young people's opinions but also older people's. We want to change their opinions on speaking out. Speaking out about problems, questions and anything else they may need. It is important that people of all ages are

comfortable with voicing their own opinions because many are scared of what others may think.

In the 18 months since first talking to Terry about doing some sort of project, the group grew from three to seven. One member explained her reasons for joining in:

At first I started working with Terry because my friends were - so I never really understood what it was really all about until we started the project. I decided to join the project because I thought it was a really nice way for young people to have a say in something or to be able to express their ideas whilst not being judged or told what to think or say, which they would be able to do while working to make the peace garden.

Another had different motives but the reason to stay involved some personal growth and a feeling of responsibility:

When I first heard about the project I was immediately interested because I could miss lessons. What I did not expect was it having a huge impact on my life and genuinely becoming interested, I have learned an incredible amount of information about the things in this world that are either ignored or overlooked. I was actually the last person to join this project and honestly I was a bit overwhelmed by the effort everyone put in. It also made me realise I have to put my 100% effort into this.

The inquiry and social action process can be visualised as continuously coiling activities where the group *identify problems, generate ideas, design and plan, create, test, analyse, and interpret* what they have found to *implement change*. The process may be repeated for different aspects of the project, for example to establish an activity in a primary school, to problematise an issue, or to evaluate how far we have travelled, so overtime many coils interlock and start to take on an interesting shape.

Deborah encouraged the group early in the project to identify problems and generate ideas by looking at the problems from our own perspectives or through the 'words, ideas, conditions, and habits central to their experience' (Shor, 1987, p. 31). This was reflected back to us by Terry and Deborah as a problem to be worked on. We considered that 'understanding the way people feel and being able to express these struggles' was a problem and listed topics that we felt were of concern: *poverty; mental health racism; sexism; loss; grief; war; being an immigrant; faith; healthcare; body image* - summing these up as 'discrimination.' We then thought about the ways that we could get other young people together to talk and how we might ensure they felt comfortable to do so, For example: *food; drama piece; fun; games; more food; activities; art and drawing* (something we enjoy); *cake stalls; walks; ice-breakers*. We suggested how we hoped young people would benefit from being involved in the project or would change: *people not being scared to show emotion; confidence; being involved/involvement; confidence to speak out; faith; enjoyment; joy; love; trust; peace; better understanding; community* (by volunteering e.g. at care homes).

Who to work with was a problem. The secondary school is quite large – 900 young people aged 11-16. The group believed that young people’s concerns about speaking out and worries about the world began a lot earlier in primary school. The sort of participation we envisaged was also educational – learning through exploring issues, finding out more about these and taking action – so we decided to work with groups of primary school children. A big question was how to get younger children talking and how to do this safely when the topics they might want to talk about, might be really sensitive. This is where the academic, youth worker, and primary schoolteachers had a role in the project. As a team together, we are still considering ethical questions around these which will be discussed in another article. The secondary school and Terry recognised the work of Pax Christi, an international catholic movement working for peace, reconciliation and non-violence that supports teachers, chaplains and youth workers in promoting a culture of peace in schools and amongst young people. One of the ways the organisation suggests bringing communities together is to plan, work and care for a common project by establishing peace gardens. As a group, we thought this was a good idea for encouraging younger children’s involvement and we successfully applied for a small grant to share between four primary schools from the Pax Christi Christian Peace Education Fund. This application highlighted how young people cannot access resources without the support of an adult. Terry had to send and sign the application for us, but we wrote the application. He insisted that Pax Christi accepted our names as the applicants, rather than him or the headteacher being listed as the main applicant, which would be the usual case. These types of mechanisms can take away ownership of young people’s projects as well as undermining the work they have put in.

Terry was also instrumental in recruiting four primary schools. He telephoned, emailed and visited all the schools. Where the schools agreed to take part, this was also followed up by an introductory email from Deborah to explain her part in the project. It was exceedingly difficult to gain time with the children in the primary classrooms because school days are so tightly packed with mandatory teaching requirements, tests, worship and then annual events such as sports day. All our attempts to establish meetings soon ran into a new school year. One school at the point of writing this article was yet to engage. Terry commented: ‘Every time I’ve tried and I’ve emailed and I’ve even texted but the school leader is extremely busy with other diocese projects for adults.’ Although all the schools were very excited to take part, impressed by the novelty of the secondary school students visiting the primary school classes and the potential for other activities such as a conference at the university, time given to the project was limited.

It was also a challenge for us to get out of lessons to work on the project. There are no periods in the day when students have free time or personal study time to develop our own projects or choose extra-curricular activities (sports or activity clubs are usually after school). We relied on Terry and Deborah to keep records and details of what was happening. Writing for this article, for example, was regarded as an additional chore - ‘It’s like homework!’ and when reminded we needed to write, ‘Oh for that Sage thing?’ Although having access to computers and phones, we preferred to ‘Write it on paper and then type it up later.’ Knowing what to write was a challenge: ‘I wouldn’t know what to write about anything.’ We had never seen a journal article before Deborah brought some



for us to look at and found it difficult to understand why anyone would read such lengthy texts. We compiled a list of the main questions we thought we could write about with Deborah, assigning one each, for example, 'I'll do what we are trying to achieve with the kids.' Even with reassurances that 'the headteacher is 100% behind you,' and 'it's not an English assignment - just write anything that comes into your head' we viewed writing as a daunting task rather than a way to express what we learned or felt. Thus, most of the detail has come from Deborah meticulously recording conversations about the project which might not have taken place if we were not aiming to write this article.

Deborah agreed to visit three primary schools, facilitating participatory activities to encourage the children to think about what they individually cared about by decorating card people in a way that expressed their self. They noted: *family, friends, pets* and occasionally a *hobby* they were into. They were then asked to think a little broader about what they cared about in the world. Themes included: *nature, animals and animal cruelty, poverty, religion, war, people being safe, friends, families, death, and caring about people*. They were encouraged to think about what they might create in response and why. One school class of year four children (aged 8-9 years) was hoping to build a 'spaceship.' Another had already drawn some wonderful designs for a peace garden that they were keen to share. They showed the plot to Deborah and at a second visit this had been moved so that it could be bigger and more prominent because now the 'teachers were all really enthusiastic' and had also begun to compile ideas for the garden. Important features for the children were: *water, moving water over pebbles* for example, *places to sit, rocks, trees, colourful flowers and scented plants, lights, light catchers, board games or other activities, pond and fish or other creatures, calming music, and meeting space*. They hoped that the areas could provide: *somewhere quiet to sit and think or to meet and talk with other children or adults; somewhere to be mindful or do yoga; appeal to different senses; have things they could pick up and hold such as pebbles*. The next stage was for them to ask other children in the school to add to the ideas and ask teachers to help put their ideas into practice.

We (the young authors) planned to meet the primary school groups during the next school term by making use of the early secondary school finish we have 1 day per week. Getting to the schools presented a challenge but with the help of Terry and Deborah, we identified people who could help such as a parent who worked at one of the schools, different transport options and if and where we might feasibly walk. We discussed what we might do: 'I think we should just get to know them,' and 'we will only have about half an hour with them.' Games and art activities were suggested: 'we could ask them to do something, colouring or something to introduce themselves or write about?' We responded to the younger children's interests by planning an activity to decorate pebbles with them for the peace gardens. And deliberated ways to introduce ourselves: 'Hi we are these people from [name of school] and we are going to do the garden with you. Just introduce ourselves like that? What's your name, sit in a circle, what do you like to do?' We also decided to organise an activity day to bring everyone together at the university. We would lead this and provide opportunities to talk. Returning to this aim whilst writing this article, one of the girls stated:

Young people's voices matter. How big or how small your voice matters. This is why a group of students at our school worked with a youth worker called Terry to change people's perspectives of this idea. We want all people no matter their age, race or gender to openly speak about issues that they believe need to be heard. We feel that many young voices are being robbed of their chance to be heard because adults believe they know what is best for us. As a group we want to change that view and create an environment that encourages young people to express their thoughts and feelings.

This quote summed up for the group why they had persevered with the project over 18 months. One young person highlighted that 'so much had happened just in terms of getting it all organised and just how long it takes.'

## Discussion

Young people view participation in relational terms (Oswell, 2013). Whilst as an action group, we wanted to improve opportunities for student voice, we envisaged this as about creating spaces in school to come together to express thoughts and feelings. We also recognised that adults could either support or place barriers in the way, as they controlled the physical places where we could collectively engage, and therefore what we could create through our interaction, collective purpose, and sharing of experiences (Hawkins, 2015). Young people may recognise their influence at home, in friendship and interest groups and during breaks at school, but less so in the processes of schooling itself (Crook and Cox, 2022) having little opportunity but to go along with the dominant academic demands (Mayall, 2001). Foregrounding better relationships and the influence children and young people can have on these, may be one way that their participation can be better understood (Bessell, 2017). The catholic ethos of the schools provided a rich source for understanding the tensions involved. On the one hand, school students are encouraged to look beyond their own lives to speak out and undo injustice. On the other, they must navigate a school system so tightly timetabled and scripted that there is little space to even think about what concerns them. And yet older and younger children alike demonstrated that they are very aware of and cared about issues affecting young lives across the world. It was lack of opportunities and spaces to think about, talk and act on their concerns that they believed was the real issue for enabling them to act for change, which is important in understanding motivation to participate in research.

Too often in academic research, children and young people are working on someone else's questions and research design. They might get to influence the approaches used to make these more 'child friendly' or they might help to shape and test methods, collect data or present findings (Larkins et al., 2021). It is much more unusual to be given time and space to identify the problems that they believe should be addressed or to have influence throughout the process, if they want to. The example of inquiry and social action that we have provided, although in its early stages, provides some useful knowledge about the motivators for young people's self-determined participation. The cycle of *identifying problems, generating ideas, designing and planning, creating, testing, analysing, and interpreting* leads to a continual process of *change* that is visible in every decision and

action that the young people take. Important to note here is that even in early decisions, this process is recognisable. Drawing attention to this recognises the capacity that children and young people have, even in an environment that does little to encourage their decision-making and action. In conducting their own inquiry – by asking questions about what matters, reflecting on their own situations and learning, and encouraging younger children to do the same – the Romero Impact Action Group have demonstrated the beginnings of a critical pedagogy approach, albeit without the additional educational support (rather than training) and time that might enable them to do this in much greater depth. This did not have to be coaxed (including from the youngest and most reluctant children in the primary school groups). They did not have to comply and thus spent some of their time talking about other things or playing, but when they did engage, they had much to say.

This shift into young people-shaped spaces can be disorienting for adults more used to controlling what happens (Larkins and Satchwell, 2023). Amongst the young authors are those who joined in at first just to see what was happening and because of their friends. But once interested they wanted to get involved. This valuing of an activity is what Ryan and Deci (2020) suggests leads to internalising a need to learn more, intrinsic motivation for different types of participation. Whilst it could be argued that the young people and children simply enjoyed doing something different to their educational routine, this motivating factor meant that the girls have stuck with this project for over 18 months, demonstrating that they recognise these activities as serious pursuits and routes to life-long learning that are worth the effort (Ryan and Deci, 2017). These beginnings of transformation as we young authors build determination and confidence in our abilities to make change resonates with youth-led PAR (Camarota and Romero, 2011). But this may also be what makes a difference between research that claims to be PAR (because young people take on researcher roles) and research which is truly collaborative. As the full team, we suggest that the latter acknowledges more equitably the capabilities of everyone in a research team (including older academics, partners and young people) by enabling everyone to bring different experiences and perspectives to the table in ways that are inclusive to them. And that this requires a commitment to recognising the relationships involved in their participation and the influence this can have as they reach out to others, by positively shaping the relationships and outcomes that their social action hopes to change. Without this subjective and intersubjective understanding, the topic or issue being researched has little meaning.

Deborah and Terry observed many opportunities to support young people in further inquiry to explore the things they care about. To do so would require more time for children and young people to shape spaces in schools where they can think and deliberate on issues and ways forward. This time is also important for them to develop their views (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). Adults are essential to this, not because children and young people need instruction on how to proceed, or what to think, but because relationships appear to be the extrinsic factors that really matter when it comes to the sort of participation young people envisage (Bessell, 2017) and these are interconnected with their intrinsic motivation. The presence of Terry as youth worker in school meant that the girls had someone to whom we could express our views freely in ways that we could not in

most classrooms. Without Terry, there would be no way to get out of lessons or be able to reach out ‘officially’ to the primary schools, or indeed connect with academics like Deborah. Terry’s presence in school, genuinely supportive relationships, recognition of young people’s talents, and information sharing, meant most of the teachers knew who he was and were usually positive about youth-led plans, because they could see the transformational effects of participation on individuals. But despite the formal education environment, other people were also supportive of the project including the headteacher, heads of year and those leaders and teachers involved at the primary schools. It is unlikely that without this level of support the project could have gone ahead, especially given the length of time it has taken to move forward. Parents were also willing to give their consent for the action group’s project to be included as evidence in a study to map and understand participation in schools as well as to develop outputs such as this article. This had full approval from the ethics committee at UCLan for the data to be used anonymously. Since then, the young authors have requested their first names be used for this article and we have sought further signed consent from all our parents for this purpose. All the adults recognised our capabilities, the broader skills and learning that were happening through the project, and most importantly placed trust in us to work together and with younger children. These qualities are rarely discussed in accounts of PAR and yet are of great importance (Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012). How these collaborative relationships are actually developed may be useful knowledge to advance understanding of what constitutes meaningful collaborative research by raising expectations about the different roles that adults and young people play and through more equitable attempts to recognise the value of each.

The question however, of how to link up young people’s own inquiry and social action with funded research is also important. Children and young people are actively constructing knowledge which can contribute to social theory when deep-seated attitudes and stereotypes are addressed. This project has demonstrated what motivates young people to get and stay involved. In inquiry and social action it appears that finding value in the process, possibly driven by a human propensity for continuous learning, is just as important as the hope for change or outputs at the end of a project. The process is more about ‘finding a voice’ than having a say because this involves growing as a person, shaping one’s identity as well as understanding the different ways it is possible to cooperate with others and influence change (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006). Here it is important to recognise that the young authors leading and involved in the project are acting collectively but this does not mean that we should be regarded as a homogenous group (Oswell, 2013). Our plurality and difference cannot be reduced to a group identity, but rather enhances our ability and power to act and deepens the meaning of what we are trying to achieve through growing solidarity with each other and the adults. Young people’s inquiry is not created by adults to increase their participation in constructing knowledge as Kim (2017) suggests, instead it builds on a capacity that all the authors believe young people already possess – being able to learn and grow and the intrinsic motivation to do so. Thus, how far adults go in shaping inquiry may be best considered through a lens of criticality – are the opportunities to understand injustice being instigated by young people and does it lead to some form of social action (Spire et al., 2021) on their part? And are there strong and

supportive intergenerational relationships that enable children and young people to feel safe and that they belong (Bessell, 2017) helping to build spaces through which to achieve these? Yet much attention is given over to extrinsic motivators and end goals and the systematic collection of data, when academics instigate and invite young people to take part in research, before their own ideas for these are sought and understood.

Perhaps then there should be a shift toward much more involvement at the ideas or pre-funding stage of research projects with scholars taking far more time to enable children and young people to identify concerns about matters that affect them and far more account of their design ideas and ways to proceed. Young people's own inquiry and social action projects in school are a good place to build these relationships because they require academics to critically reflect on the concerns that young people raise and the ways through which they construct knowledge without this having been diluted by the academic's pressing deadlines or educational imperatives (Larkins and Satchwell, 2023). In turn academics' engagement with schools is a much-appreciated link into higher education for young people and teachers, bringing additional learning experiences. This level of involvement would require universities and research funding bodies to value young people's inquiry and social action more readily as evidence in identifying what young people are concerned about and believe needs public recognition and change. Young people advisory groups are beginning to be more widely used to involve them in research design and analysis, however, these are often invited after academics apply for funding when the aims and objectives have already been set. Earlier engagement with children and young people to identify concerns with them and to support their own inquiry would facilitate their real influence over what is researched and why (Horgan and Martin, 2021). This may require different ways of enabling young people to communicate evidence about their projects and ideas but it also requires funders to seriously consider these alongside the more traditional outputs of the Academy.

This is not a call to downplay the need for high quality evidence to justify research funding but instead to improve rigour by better recognition and respect for the knowledge and experience that children and young people can bring to how the social world is understood. This also requires some serious critical reflection on how knowledge is constructed and importantly whose knowledge counts and why. Schools in this project are not just the settings for inquiry and social action, they are also the conveyors of what knowledge is currently valued by societies. In the UK, emphasis on individual learning in science and maths as a way to drive up the numbers of young people prepared to work in these fields and to grow the economy, is creating a huge gap in young people's creative experience, social and emotional learning and cooperative skills which is perhaps reflected in our project by the ways that young people are looking for spaces to think and do things differently. Routinely banking knowledge in order to pass tests and exams, the antithesis of critical pedagogy, positions children and young people as highly dependent on their teachers for instruction and learning, downplaying their own agency and capabilities. And yet the inquiry and social action we have described points towards the real propensity that young people have for self-determined learning, what motivates them and the roles that adults can play to support this. Thomas et al. (2016) suggests students and teachers regard well-being as constituted through relationships and an important aspect of

this is mutual respect for their rights and care. Adults' attitudes towards students and their learning are important because they bely whether children and young people are viewed as passive or active in educational opportunities, mutually respected, and thus whether spaces for participation are enabled. These must enable children and young people to speak more freely as this conveys a respect for their rights and experiences, signalling that their voices will not only be heard, but also have influence by inviting sharing of differences (Pearce and Wood, 2019).

Freire's (1992) critical pedagogy, which the young people identified with, is also a pedagogy of hope because it encourages rethinking of young people as agents in the classroom and the world, with the ability to grow as people and change things - if the adults around them scaffold rather than restrict this. Generational relationships are important because the young authors are also contesting our positioning by adults whilst in school and suggesting different contexts through which we might interact that recognise our capabilities (Mayall, 2001) as agentic and able to participate (Oswell, 2013). Participation could be described as a continuum of social interactions and experiences, that shapes how children and young people perceive themselves, others and the world. According to Giroux:

'Freire was acutely aware that what makes critical pedagogy so dangerous... is that central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change,' (2010, p.717).

This questioning by talking together about what concerns them, is what brought the group together to begin the Peace Education Project and where we envisage the roots of change. The slow pace of this project, whilst admittedly frustrating for all parties at times, has enabled us all to reflect on the real value of supporting young people to open and shape safe and slower deliberative spaces to interact in an otherwise fast paced and overly timetabled existence and to start to consider how meaningful this really is.

## Conclusion

Without participation opportunities like those described, schools are undoing children and young people's capacities to make the world a better place. Participation envisaged as a collective process where young people and adults build relationships and learn to cooperate through inquiry, together rallying other children and young people to get involved, to think about and explore concerns, and learn through planning and taking action for change, is meaningful. It not only enables children and young people to have a voice, but to learn to speak out and take action on what they care about - the issues and problems that need addressing, and that researchers and funders need to hear. The young authors of this article believe that in every classroom, area and region of the world, there are many childhoods, and every young person should be able to tell their own story and be understood. This should begin with classroom time for children and young people to think, talk and act on issues that concern them, opening minds to possibilities and finding ways forward for a better world, as part of everyday participation.

This requires adults – teachers, youth workers, researchers and policy makers – to rethink narrow schooling and to put time and effort into providing places in schools for young people to create safe deliberative spaces. Through their own inquiry and social action, children and young people can contribute valuable knowledge to research and lead the way in developing meaningful collaboration. However, funders and the Academy must make more effort to recognise fully young people’s own ways of identifying, exploring and communicating knowledge.

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