

Youth led social action at school:

'It made me think that there could be a way to make things better in the future.'

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.

Zoha, Zainab, Alice, Elodie, Erin, Izzie, and Zafiya
With Deborah Crook* and Terry

What is this about?

The Education Peace Project is about children and young people finding out and doing social action about making the world a better place. We are a group of 13- and 14-year-olds known as the Romero Impact Action Group at a catholic school in northern England. We think that there are a lot of things that worry young people and influence their lives across the world. To make a difference, young people need to be able to think and speak freely about this at school so we can work out how we can help make change. We suggest schools could do more to support young people to think, talk and act on issues that concern them.

We wrote an article with Deborah who is a researcher at a university and Terry who is our youth worker. This is about how we did the first parts of our project to find out and take some action about what matters to children and young people. It was really hard. We had never seen a journal article before. It felt like homework. But we want all children and young people to be able to speak out. We want to give younger children a chance to speak out too.

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.

Our full article can be accessed by this link: [Youth-led social action at school: 'It made me think that there could be a way to make things better in the future' - Deborah J Crook, Zoha, Zainab, Alice, Elodie, Erin, Isabelle, Safiya, Terry, 2024](#)

What did we do?

We think young people can be agents of change by taking part in peace building. But we also think that 'understanding the way people feel and being able to express these struggles' is a problem. We do not have much chance to do this at school.

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.

We first thought about what we think is bothering young people and wrote these down. These were things like:

**poverty, mental health, racism, sexism,
loss, grief, war, being an immigrant,
faith, healthcare, body image.**

We thought most of this could be summed up as '**discrimination.**' We thought about how we could get people talking about these not-so-great

subjects. For example we could have food, do drama, or art. It needs to be fun.

We also wanted to work with younger children because we think they have concerns too. We found the Pax Christi Christian Peace Education Fund and applied for some funding with help from Terry and got this! This meant we could give three primary schools some money to help them build peace gardens. One school wanted to build a spaceship in theirs.

The Education Peace Project

We thought about the ways that we could get the children together to talk and feel comfortable to do so. We suggested:

food; drama piece; fun; games; more food; activities;
art and drawing (something we enjoy); cake stalls;
walks; ice-breakers

We talked about an activity where we could give the children pebbles to write messages on and colour, so these could go in their gardens and help them to think.

It was really difficult to get out of school to go and meet the children in the primary schools, so Deborah from the University went to start building bridges for us. She asked the children what they were concerned about and they had similar ideas to us. They mentioned:

nature, animals and animal cruelty, poverty, religion, war, people
being safe, friends, families, death, and caring about people.

Deborah also asked the primary school children to think about what they would want from their peace gardens. They wanted things in the garden that they could hear and touch and smell. They also wanted to be able to sit quietly or talk in small groups. Things like board games and comfy seats might help this.

We thought about how by going in to the schools to meet the children we might be able to help by encouraging children to:

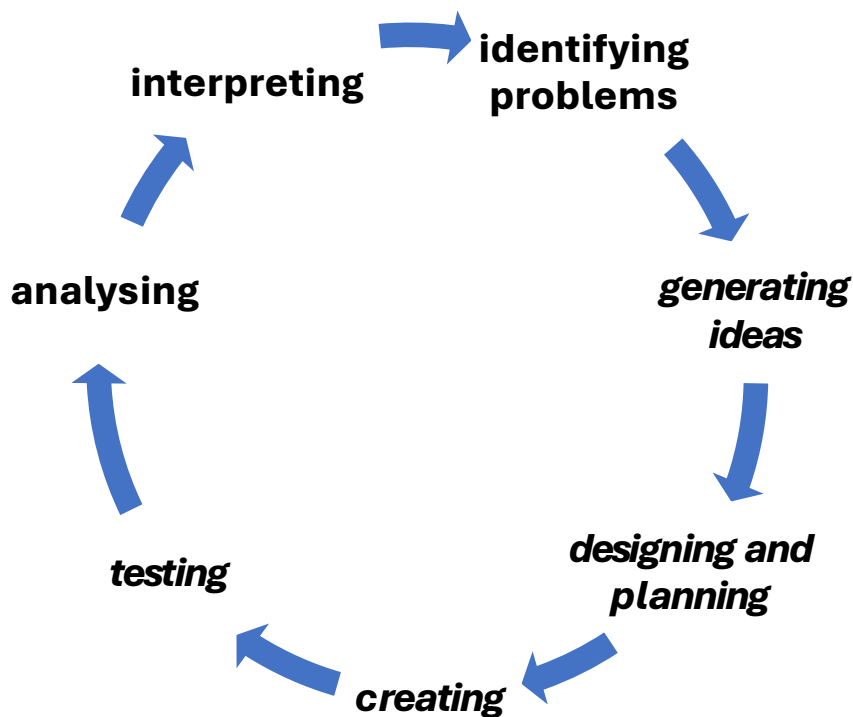
not be scared to show emotion; have confidence; get involved; have confidence to speak out; have faith; with enjoyment; joy; love; trust; peace; better understanding; and community

Why this project matters

We believe that young people having opportunities at school to think about what concerns them are really important. The researcher, Deborah, told us about a man who was called Paulo Freire from Brazil who thought we should do things like this at school too. This is so that we understand why some people are treated badly and what we can do to change this. But we need to be able to find spaces at school where we are in charge of what happens and so can feel comfortable to talk about the things we want to. Sometimes researchers do this with young people so that we can have a say about things that need changing.

Unfortunately, it is usually adults that decide what this should be about and no matter how much they try to make the research 'child friendly' it does not always give us chance to talk about what we really care about or to speak out and act on this. By doing our own project we have shown that we can get

organised and work things out. Without knowing it, we were following a cycle that helps people to have influence when they try to create change:



We learned so much just from doing this. It was really good because it was not a lot of tasks that a teacher had told us to do but things we wanted to do. This motivated us and we kept going for 18 months even though we still had so much to do. The adults were important too. Terry the youth worker let us say things how we wanted to say it. How we see it. He telephoned, emailed, and visited four schools and introduced them to the researcher. He also got us out of lessons. The teachers and headteacher liked the project so they did not make too much fuss about this. Even so we had so much schoolwork to do and always had to catch up on it. This got worse when we started doing our GCSEs (exams that children aged 15-16 do in the UK).

We believe that in every classroom, area and region of the world, there are many childhoods, and that every young person should be able to tell their own story and be understood. We think a good place to begin would be classroom time for young people to think, talk and act on issues that concern them, that opens minds to possibilities and finding ways forward for a better world. What we didn't mention is that we are a group of seven girls. Some of us are Catholic like our school and some of us are Muslim. The project shows how we can cooperate and work together for change when teachers, youth workers, and researchers support our aims and the value of children and young people having a voice.

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.

*Correspondence: Dr Deborah Crook, University of Lancashire

dcrook5@uclan.ac.uk