

Toilet Talk

Research Report.

2023- 2024



Funded by



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Research aims.

The research adopted a young people as researchers methodology to look at ways we could co-construct toilet policies and practice that works for all pupils. We wanted to work with the young people to identify how the toilets were currently experienced by pupils in their school and to work with staff to look at how we could make positive changes.

Secondary school details.

This was the first time the toilet talk project had undertaken toilet research within the lower years of a secondary school. We wanted to highlight how all year groups have important insights and how pupils are best placed to investigate this topic.

School connection.

This school has pupils aged 11-18 years and the school lead for the project suggested that the year 9 prefects would potentially be interested in the project. Creating a research relationship with York St John became an important part of our work as many of these young people were interested in continuing into higher education.

Children and young people as researchers.

The young researchers made decisions at every step of the research journey. They discussed what they wanted to find out from their peers based on their own experiences. They decided upon the method they wanted to use and collected data from their peers. Collectively we picked the important elements from the findings that we wanted to share and then created a presentation to share with senior leaders in the school. The presentation included key changes that the youth researchers wanted to propose and aim for as part of the project.

02

The project

How the young researchers became part of the project, what they hoped to discover and how they gathered research data.

Recruitment.

The year 9 prefects were invited by the school lead to meet the lead researcher and were all given information about the project. Those who were interested, volunteered their time to join the sessions for a period of 8 weeks during school time.

The research team.

There were 8 young researchers and one adult researcher who made up the research team. We explored different research methods, possible research questions and the importance of individual rights within research.

Our insights.

As a group, the young researchers gathered their own ideas and experiences of school toilets. These ideas then helped us to create statements that they could use to gather other pupils opinions within school. For example, they felt that the toilets lacked a place to hang bags and coats and that at times there was often rubbish in the toilets or sinks, and they wanted to know if other pupils had experienced the same.

Conducting research in school.

We created an online questionnaire with 16 statements about school toilets and pupils experiences in school. The questionnaire gave consent information to pupils about taking part and what would happen to the answers they gave. The pupils who wanted to take part did so in form time.

Looking at the findings.

Almost 200 pupils responded to the questionnaire which gave us a good selection data to analyse. As a team we looked through the responses and decided what we would like to share. We carefully explored the quantitative responses and chose some key qualitative quotes to share with SLT.

179 pupils responded to our survey about school toilets. The responses ranged from pupils in years 7-9, and respondents were 35% male, 63% female and 2% of participants chose to self-describe their gender identity. Here are some of the key findings.

- **52% of respondents somewhat or strongly disagree that there is enough time to go to the toilet at lunch or break.**
- **32% of respondents have sometimes used the toilet as a safe space, with an additional 7% saying they use the toilets as a safe space 'most of the time'.**
- **60% of respondents think that having access to sanitary products in the toilets is a good idea.**
- **56% of respondents find food waste in toilets or sinks always or most of the time.**
- **70% of respondents think hooks on cubicle doors would always be useful.**

The most common themes within the responses were sanitary provision, cleanliness of toilets, use of toilet spaces and the policy regarding when pupils can use the toilets. The young researchers used these findings to inform the potential changes they requested from the senior leadership team.

04

Calling for change

How the young researchers shared their findings and used this to push for changes within the current school system to encourage better provision for all pupils.

Sharing with SLT.

The young researchers were invited to present their findings at an SLT meeting after school. There were 12 senior staff members present including the principle and vice principle. The young researchers were given time at the beginning of the meeting to share their work, the findings and their requests for changes within the toilet spaces.

Changes we proposed.

- **Our suggestion** - Period provision within the toilets with insights from pupils shared such as; 'Put pads/tampons in so it's not awkward'; 'Sanitary products in the bathrooms for girls who are embarrassed to ask'.
- **Our suggestion** - Small bins in toilets as many pupils highlighted how sanitary bins or toilets were often full of rubbish; 'No rubbish bins in toilets, sanitary bins used for rubbish'; 'Often littered in'.
- **Our suggestion** - Hooks on the toilet doors with evidence to support; 'Floor is wet so your bag gets damp from the floors. We need door hooks'; 'There is no where to put your bag'.

Discussion.

The senior leaders were open to the suggestions and had lots of questions regarding the proposals. They understood that hooks would be useful and that litter was a problem in the spaces. Sanitary provision was an area that they already had policies in place but were open to working with the youth researchers to make these products more accessible. The youth researchers explained their understanding of questions that would need to be explored such as whose responsibility it would be to keep the sanitary provision stocked up, the cost implications of any changes and how to work with the building owners to add things such as coat hooks and bins into the toilet spaces.

05

Reflections

Young researchers reflections concerning their recruitment, their engagement with peers and the research and presenting to senior staff within their setting.

Talking about toilets with peers.

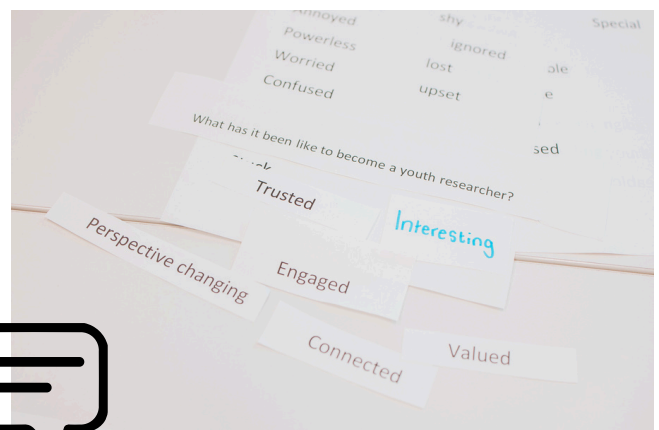
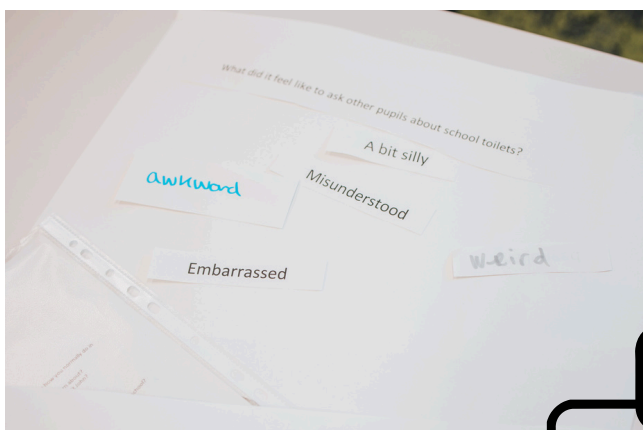
A key area of discussion within this project was how it felt to 'do toilet research' amongst peers within a secondary school. The young researchers highlighted how they had at times felt embarrassed and awkward. Through further discussion some of the young researchers shared that they felt 'misunderstood', as they felt that no-one else in school really understood what the project was or what it was trying to achieve. They also felt that if more people had been given a chance to engage with the research, the understanding of the project may have been clearer amongst peers.

Sharing with SLT.

After the young researchers had shared their work with the SLT team there was no time for us as a research team to debrief and discuss how it had gone, and the young researchers highlighted this as a key area that had been overlooked. They also discussed the impact they felt they had had during the SLT meeting, with one young researcher suggesting, 'A smaller group of people might have felt like they listened'.

What has it been like to become a youth researcher?

The second photo below shows the young researchers described feeling 'connected', 'trusted', and 'valued' in their roles of young researchers.



Presenting at York St John University.

The young researchers shared their findings at a young researchers conference at York St John University. They shared the research with Professors, academics and other young researchers.

Moving forward.

The young researchers were asked at the YSJ conference how they planned to make sure that the SLT within their school were held accountable to make sure the changes they had been discussing would happen. The youth researchers explained how they had identified other groups of young people within their school that they could work with to keep the work going after the project had finished. Some of the youth researchers also expressed an interest in co-writing a piece of work either for a blog or a journal if they have the time within the next school year.

Recommendations from this project.

- This project identifies how collaborating with children and young people as researchers can uncover insights into pupils experiences within school settings. More projects that work with democratic and co-research approaches would enable settings to better shape the school experience and environment for all pupils.
- This project highlighted how communication at the start of a project is vital to enable **all** pupils and staff within settings to fully understand the research. Information about the breadth of university research projects needs to be included with initial information and consent sessions. A project timeline and session content information sheet could be used to help explain the details of what co-research projects are aiming to achieve (see below).



Project timeline for peer research in schools.

INTRODUCTION AND CONSENT

Introduction to researcher, the project aims & ethos of project. Invite and consent forms. Introduction to the topic and becoming a researcher.

SESSION ONE

Consent forms returned – Why become a youth researcher?

What do we already know about the topic?

SESSION TWO

Ethical considerations of research – Your rights in research and rights of peer participants.

What do we want to know from peers about the topic?

SESSION THREE

How can we engage peers in the research ethically and meaningfully? What method can we use and why?

Consent processes with peers and data collection.

SESSION FOUR

What do other pupils say about the topic? What insights have we discovered?

What have we found out and how will we share?

SESSION FIVE

How to collate and share the insights and findings. Will we offer ideas about change or impact?

How to share the insights in a meaningful and engaging way?

SESSION SIX

Presenting the findings – What is it we want to share and take forward?

Who will hear this research and how best to communicate it?

REFLECTING UPON EXPERIENCE

What does it mean to become a youth peer researcher?
What does a co-research space look and feel like?
What next steps shall we take?