Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Haines Lyon, Charlotte and Little, Alice (2025) Youth co-research: A guide to engaging children and young people as youth researchers in schools. Project Report. York St John University, York St John ISJ website.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/13605/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/research/institute-for-social-justice/Youth-Co-research---A-Guide.pdf

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Youth co-research

A guide to engaging children and young people as youth researchers in schools

For undergraduate students or research assistants

The British Academy

Leverhulme Trust

Est. 1841 | York St John University

Institute for Social Justice
York St John University

Table of contents

Introduction 4
Using this guide 6
Youth co-research 7
Key values of participatory co-research 7
Affecting change 7

Phase A – Developing an ethical research project.... 8
Building relationships 8
Gatekeeper involvement 8
Consent 10
Safeguarding 10
Group manifesto 11
Rights in research 11
Anonymity and confidentiality 12
Choosing pseudonyms 13

Phase B – Undertaking the research project 14
Introducing the research 14
Model of working 15
Step one - What do we know? 16
Step two - What do we want to know? 17
Step three - What have we found out and how we will share this? 18

Phase C – Concluding the research project 20
Sparking discussions about research engagement. 20
Further sharing of the research 20
Goodbyes 21

Conclusion 22

References 23

Further Reading 24

Appendicies 25
Appendix 1 - Project timeline for peer research in schools 25
Appendix 2 - Rights in Research 26
Appendix 3 - A guide to choosing research avatars 27
Appendix 4 - Understanding co-research space emotions resource 28
Appendix 5 - Word bank to use with emotion word resource 29
Appendix 6- Youth Researcher certificate template 30
Appendix 7 - Dear Headteacher letter 31

Figures
Figure 1 Pupil researchers alongside technical adult researcher 5
Figure 2 Rights in research 11
Figure 3 We are the toilet research buddies! 12
Figure 4 One pupil researchers' avatar 13
Figure 5 Model of working in youth co-research spaces (Little, 2024) 15
Figure 6 'Our school toilets' 16
Figure 7 Pupil researchers in a research session 17
Figure 8 Pupil researchers presenting at YSJ 19

Introduction

This guide has been developed by researchers working within English school settings to engage ‘pupils as researchers’ (Fielding, 2001, Kellett, 2005), in other words, working with pupils to design and carry out research projects. Although much has been written about ‘pupils as researchers’ the term ‘youth researcher’ is used in this guide as that is what was chosen by some of the pupils working with us on our various Toilet Talk projects (Claudie, Emma, Noah and Caitlin (2025), Haines Lyon et al , 2024).

This resource has been developed with the understanding that there has been a significant narrowing of educational experiences where children and young people can engage in meaningful decision making, actively express their views and work cooperatively to achieve things (Crook, 2021). We draw on our Toilet Talk research funded by the Gender and Education Association and the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust. The impetus for our projects was the apparent problematic toilet policy and practice in schools and the belief that children and young people were best placed to afford change in their local schools.

After three successful projects with English primary, secondary and sixth form schools, we have developed this guide to support university students and research assistants to work with children and young people to carry out research into other issues. We have shared examples of our work and our insights into the process of equipping children and young people with research skills, with an aim to expand possibilities for democratic co-research spaces within the current English school system. The research methodology described in this guide is participatory youth co-research, which in this context works with pupils as researchers.

As part of this research methodology, you will be exploring ways to create spaces for research with children and young people within UK educational structures, and it is hoped that the research you undertake will add to the conversation about meaningful co-research. This guide includes questions for adult researchers to reflect upon throughout the research planning and when undertaking the project to extend the evaluation and deepen understandings of what it is that encourages productive, collaborative and united youth co-research spaces and the development of good co-research.

This guide is intended to offer practical ideas and support for those wishing to establish co-research that develops pupils as researchers in school settings. There is no set way to conduct participatory co-research, with a lot of the relationship building and project development happening in-situ and being very context specific, however we think the steps suggested in the guide provide a strong footing. The resources in the back should also be useful.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the youth researchers and schools that worked with us, as this guide wouldn’t be possible without them.

Charlotte and Alice.

Figure 1 Pupil researchers alongside technical adult researcher

“Every week we spend time doing research and think more people should be able to have a go!”

(Primary School Pupil researchers)

Using this guide

You, as the technical adult researcher, (this term refers to the lead researcher on the co-research project who is older and has more experience of engaging with research processes, Proefke and Barford, 2023) are about to embark upon co-research with a group of children and young people. This guide will offer tips and insights that cover the different stages that you will go through as a co-research team. Use this guide to create your own plan for the research; expand and adapt the things that you find useful. The guide is split into three research phases:

A. Developing an ethical research project

Undertaking the research project

C. Concluding the research project

The guide is designed for projects that engage children and young people in school contexts, in any year group, and the content can be adapted accordingly. The model outlined is intended to take place within lesson time or after school, for one hour a week over a period of 6-8 weeks. There are resources within the appendix that can be copied or adapted to use within sessions or to share with pupils and staff. There are check lists of things you will need to take with you or to consider at each stage of the project.

‘Children are party to the subculture of childhood which gives them a unique ‘insider’ perspective that is critical to our understanding of children’s worlds.’ (Kellett, 2005)

Youth co-research

Facilitating opportunities for young people to become researchers is an approach to research that aims to prioritise young people’s perspectives, follow their agendas and affirm their lived experience throughout the research process. Research *with* and *by* young people can make significant contributions to the research world by increasing understanding and raising awareness of important issues (Kellett, 2011). Within school settings there are sometimes established avenues to work with youth voice, such as school councils, or there may be gaps in the schools’ resources that means there is an absence of this kind of work. Working with technical adult researchers (Proefke and Barford, 2023) offers schools one way to engage with youth voice and offers pupils the experience of engaging with research on a topic or issue that is present within their school (Kellett, 2005).

The research you will be undertaking is defined as youth-co-research where adults and young people share their mutual expertise as they carry out the research as opposed to youth-focused research in which adults find out young peoples’ opinions, or youth participatory action research in which the young people lead the research with the support of an adult (Proefke and Barford, 2023). There will be different roles within the sessions that will mean at times the technical researcher will be responsible for completing research tasks, and at times the youth researchers will be responsible for completing research tasks. Barnikis et al. (2019) notes that participatory research with children and young people should not be thought of as giving voice through the research process, but more in regard to how opinions and experiences can be elevated through fuller and more equitable participation (Barnikis et al. 2019).

Key values of participatory co-research

- Equitable engagement
- Co-learning for young people, academics and practitioners
- Creating space for difference and discussion
- Open ended approach to participation
- Creating opportunities for dialogue and reflection amongst co-research group
- Adults and young people coming together to share expertise and conduct research

(Proefke and Barford, 2023)

Affecting change

Youth co-research projects can encourage new perspectives on topics or issues that were previously only considered from an adult point of view, and they can also affect change in a variety of ways for those involved. Within Toilet Talk the youth researchers reported increased confidence in speaking and presenting; they shared how feeling part of a team and developing new friendships brought real value to their experience; and how taking part meant that pupils could see they were trying to enact change and how they hoped this kind of pro-social behaviour might encourage other pupils to follow in their footsteps. Youth researchers in one secondary school were encouraged by the overwhelming support from their peers in asking for sanitary provision (63% agreed that more discrete provision was needed) and hooks on the backs of toilet doors (71% of pupils agreed that hooks would remove the problem of school bags placed on unsanitary floors) that they were able to confidently ask their senior leadership team (SLT) for these important changes to be made. Each project will have individual goals, aspirations and findings and the co-research team should work together to identify these at the beginning of the project and keep revisiting and reflecting upon these throughout.

Questions to reflect upon

- What is your experience of engaging with children and young people? How will this shape the project? Do you need any support in this area?
- How will you uphold the values of participatory co-research within a school setting?

Phase A – Developing an ethical research project

Making sure your research project is ethical is an ongoing responsibility within youth co-research. There are steps you will need to take at the beginning of a project, including gaining ethical approval, and some you will need to keep reflecting upon and negotiating throughout with the youth researchers. Some of the key steps to practicing ethical research are described in this section.

Building relationships

When entering a school there will be many adults that may be acting as gatekeepers or will be working alongside you in their capacity as a teacher. You must remember their primary responsibility is to teach and work within the schools' rules and boundaries, which may differ from the ethos and principles of the project. Initial meetings with staff can help to mitigate issues arising from conflicting ideas later in the project. Talk to teachers and senior leadership about what you hope to achieve throughout the project and how you will take an experiential approach to the 'research methods training' with the youth researchers (Kellett, 2005). Explaining the principles and pedagogy behind the 'pupils as researchers' approach can help to ease some of the tensions that can present themselves (literature such as Kellett (2005) and Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher (2009) can be used).

With the pupil researchers it is important to build trust and confidence in their own abilities to do research early. Explain that they are the experts within the research and that your role is to guide and facilitate the sessions, ultimately working alongside them. Be clear about your role within the school as a researcher, rather than being addressed formally, using first names can help to differentiate this. Take steps where possible to carve out your own space within the setting and accommodate the pupil researchers in a way that encourages a relaxed atmosphere. Sitting on the floor, taking shoes off or working outside in the playground can all help to change the classroom space into a more neutral, relaxed research space.

Gatekeeper involvement

It is important to discuss with the gatekeepers at the beginning of the project the role they see themselves as having throughout the research. Ask them if they will be in the sessions, will they offer support or will they be absent. The research will differ depending on the role the gatekeeper takes within the session, but in each scenario it is important to keep them up to date with the project and encourage them to support the research within the wider school space. Gatekeepers can bring valuable insights to the research but can also create tension through power imbalances and coercion. Discuss what the gatekeepers' intentions are for the project and explore how their engagement can support the elevation of pupil voice within the wider school setting.

Sharing a timeline resource (Appendix 1) at the start of the project gives gatekeepers and pupil researchers clear details of what the sessions will include and the aims of the project. The Rights in Research poster (Appendix 2) can also be shared with staff to encourage understanding of the ways in which children's rights will be upheld within the research.

Checklist

- ☐ I have spoken with staff/gatekeepers about the participatory approach I will take with the co-research.
- ☐ I have identified with staff/gatekeepers an appropriate space for the research sessions.
- ☐ I feel prepared to support pupil researchers through research methods training.
- ☐ I have thought of ways to create a comfortable environment for the pupil researchers.

Affecting change

Youth co-research projects can encourage new perspectives on topics or issues that were previously only considered from an adult point of view, and they can also affect change in a variety of ways for those involved. Within Toilet Talk the youth researchers reported increased confidence in speaking and presenting; they shared how feeling part of a team and developing new friendships brought real value to their experience; and how taking part meant that pupils could see they were trying to enact change and how they hoped this kind of pro-social behaviour might encourage other pupils to follow in their footsteps. Youth researchers in one secondary school were encouraged by the overwhelming support from their peers in asking for sanitary provision (63% agreed that more discrete provision was needed) and hooks on the backs of toilet doors (71% of pupils agreed that hooks would remove the problem of school bags placed on unsanitary floors) that they were able to confidently ask their senior leadership team (SLT) for these important changes to be made. Each project will have individual goals, aspirations and findings and the co-research team should work together to identify these at the beginning of the project and keep revisiting and reflecting upon these throughout.

Questions to reflect upon

- What is your experience of engaging with children and young people? How will this shape the project? Do you need any support in this area?
- How will you uphold the values of participatory co-research within a school setting?

Consent

Informing youth researchers about their right to voluntarily engage with the research project can sometimes be difficult when research projects are offered to pupils in a school context. Pupils may have been identified by gatekeepers for the project and they may not feel like they are able to say 'no' to taking part (Kirby, 2020). Information regarding the voluntary nature and option to leave the project at any point is important to share in the initial meeting with potential youth researchers. Informed consent forms should be given to all interested pupils and their parents or guardians. Lomax, Smith and Walsh have created some valuable digital resources (2020), and technical researchers can use these kinds of resources to explain research projects, introduce themselves and explain how choice and consent procedures work. Process consent should be discussed throughout the project and youth researchers should be able to choose which elements of the research they feel are appropriate, and comfortable, to engage with (Gallagher et al., 2010). The dialogic and negotiated consent process should continue with youth researchers through to the dissemination of outputs and resources.

Checklist

- ☐ I feel confident discussing with pupil researchers about their rights within the research and the voluntary nature of the research project.
- ☐ I have identified ways to explain the research project to pupil researchers.
- ☐ I have consent documents that will be shared at the start of the research project.
- ☐ I understand that process consent is ongoing and will run throughout the entire project.

Safeguarding

Each school will have their own safeguarding policies and point of contact, and it is important that as the adult technical researcher you understand your responsibilities. Being clear and open with youth researchers about these responsibilities enables you to clarify for the youth researchers when you would need to share any information from your sessions with school staff. Conversations about safeguarding can include topics such as confidentiality, anonymity and the procedures the technical researcher will need to follow, but also what they must do as youth researchers if a participant makes a disclosure. It is also worth having a link person that pupils will be comfortable talking to if they want to withdraw from the research or raise a concern about you or the project.

Group manifesto

In the first session with pupil researchers, when all consent forms have been returned, it is important to establish a group manifesto and commitments of the co-research team. This should include things that the youth researchers choose but also crucial elements of the research process, for example:

- Do not use names when sharing experiences.
- Only share what you feel comfortable.
- The technical researcher has a responsibility to keep everyone safe and will share anything that concerns them with appropriate safeguarding staff.
- Pupil researchers have the choice to take part if and how they wish.
- We listen to each other.

The manifesto can include intentions for the group as well as responsibilities and can be complimented by the Rights in Research resource (Appendix 2). The manifesto is then displayed each week for all youth researchers and adults involved to clearly see how the group is underpinning the research project with ethical practice.

Checklist

- ☐ I have resources to create a large group manifesto – pens, sheets of large paper, blue-tac.
- ☐ I feel confident holding a discussion with pupil researchers about the commitments of the group.
- ☐ I have identified the appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures within the school and I will explain these to pupil researchers.

Rights in research

The rights in research resource (Appendix 2) was developed from Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr's (2018) charter of rights for children taking part in research. You can use it to discuss:

- What rights do children and young people have within research?
- What are some of the conflicts presented by highlighting children and young people's rights within a school environment?
- What can you develop in your project that will encourage upholding of rights?
- How can you draw upon rights to practice ethical research amongst peers?

In recent research projects youth researchers drew around a member of the co-research team to 'attach' rights to three different bodies, one with human rights, one with school rights and one with research rights. This can bring up interesting discussion points about what democratic spaces look like and how, and where, children and young people can enact their rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as a tool to talk about rights and ethical research can also be used.

Figure 2 Rights in research

Checklist

- ☐ I have resources that could be used to discuss 'Rights' on a large scale, e.g. large sheets of paper and pens or playground chalk.
- ☐ I have collated all the resources to enable me to confidently hold a discussion with pupil researchers about their rights in research.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Within each project the youth researchers will feel differently about how they participate, if they want to be associated with the research in school and whether they want to share the research outside of their institution. In previous projects youth researchers have presented their research to adults and academics, but some have shown reluctance to share their research amongst peers or in school assemblies. Having early discussions about this are important, and establishing how the group will be known means you can create a collective identity to share the research. In previous projects pupils have been known as 'the toilet research buddies' and 'the research gang'. Within an initial session when discussing ethical research, it is important to discuss anonymity and the use of pseudonyms for the youth researchers and also for their participants. Toilet Talk projects start with the assumption of anonymity but negotiate the voice and identification of researchers as appropriate going forward through the individual co-research projects. Confidentiality can be discussed when creating your group manifesto and when discussing methods of data collection.

Checklist

- ☐ I understand the need to work with the pupil researchers to explore their individual and collective identities within the co-research.
- ☐ I feel confident to discuss where and how the pupil researchers will be represented for their involvement with the research.
- ☐ I feel prepared to start with the assumption of anonymity but negotiate the voice and identification of researchers as appropriate.

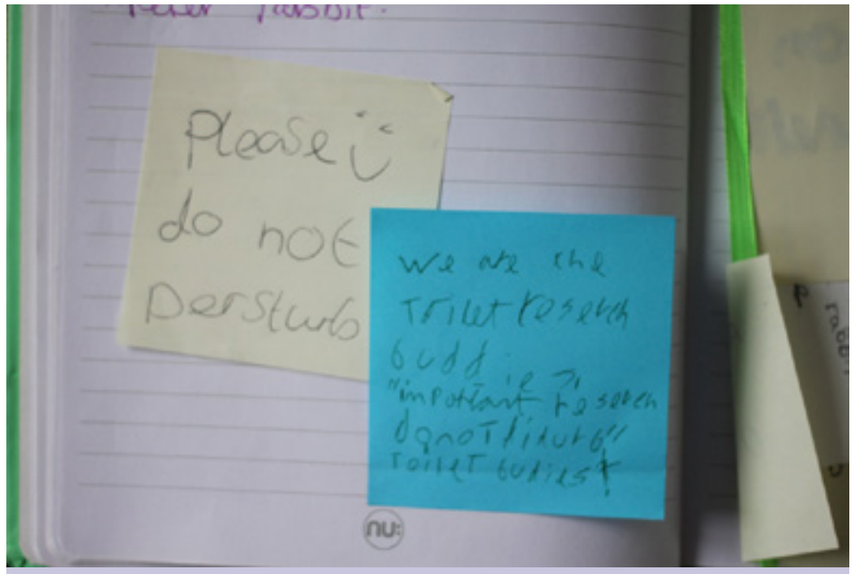


Figure 3 We are the toilet research buddies!

Choosing pseudonyms

One example of how to discuss and choose pseudonyms with youth researchers is to encourage the creation of research avatars for your time together. In previous research projects, some youth researchers chose animals that they felt reflected their own characteristics, and some created playdough models that became the mascot for the whole group. Youth researchers have named their avatars and then used these to discuss how they would share the research. Choosing or creating avatars gives youth researchers the opportunity to deepen their understanding of pseudonyms throughout the research process (Allen, 2016). The naming of the group and of themselves within the research is another element of participatory research that enables youth researchers to have ownership over elements of the research that may ordinarily be decided upon by adults. A resource explaining one approach to this is included (Appendix 3).

Figure 4 One pupil researchers' avatar

Checklist

- ☐ I feel confident to introduce the pupil researchers to pseudonyms.
- ☐ I have identified the resources I need for pupil researchers to choose or create research avatars (e.g. pictures of animals, Lego figures, playdoh).
- ☐ I will work to make sure all pupil researchers are listened to regarding the sharing and ownership of the research.

Questions to think about

- How will you work with ideas of confidentiality and anonymity?
- How will you balance the needs of the young people and the gatekeeper?
- How will you balance time in each session to include thinking about ethics?

Phase B – Undertaking the research project

Introducing the research

With youth co-research projects, the main topic of research can sometimes be set externally (by funders or in agreement with the school). If the topic of the research is already set, you may have to explain how the project will work to gatekeepers before the research begins and then again to students before they agree to participate. It is important to determine the topic and the main lines of enquiry before the sessions begin. It is important to take time within initial meetings with pupils to explore this.

Topic definition has been done by holding an initial 'interest' session within school, inviting pupils who may be interested in engaging with research and the university to share their ideas. You will facilitate a session where pupils interested in the topics get to engage and have a say and explain you will explore the topic in more depth once consent forms have been returned as part of the research project.

If the research topic is already chosen (for example by funders), you may wish to:

- Explore with a wider group of pupils what the main issues currently are.
- Explain to pupils that they will be responsible for the direction of the research.
- Share examples of how topics about one subject can be inclusive of others' issues if the pupils so wish (for example, a recent research project about school toilets also considered if there was enough social space within school for pupils to use instead of using the toilets to socialise).

If pupil researchers are free to decide upon the topic of the research, you may wish to:

- Facilitate opportunities for as many pupils as possible to highlight common issues within school.
- Encourage working with others to determine the research topic.
- Work collaboratively and democratically to decide upon a research topic.
- Document other areas that were considered.
- Feedback about how and why you are choosing a particular research topic.

Model of working

The length of time within the school is likely to be dependent on various factors. Most projects involve working with a school for around 6-8 weeks, with extra sessions before and after to introduce and to finalise and share any outputs at the end of a project (see Appendix 1). This section will detail how the three questions (Figure 5) can be applied to a research project, covering 6 sessions with pupil researchers. Each main question can be explored through the following steps:

Figure 5 *Model of working in youth co-research spaces (Little, 2024)*

Step one - What do we know?

This stage of the research is about exploring what it is about the topic that the youth researchers would like to investigate further. Working together to ask questions about the topic, share experiences and gather ideas for the direction of the research.

How can we document this?

Some examples of previous documenting and gathering of early knowledge:

- Written map of ideas
- Post-it notes discussion board
- Playdough models
- LEGO creations (e.g. what would an ideal school look like)

How can it inform our research?

Choosing from initial ideas and developing research questions is important to move the research forward. Consider the following:

- Recapping after the initial session and asking youth researchers to highlight their most important discussion points
- Taking votes on what to move forward with
- Sectioning off the ideas into themes
- Rating the areas 0-10 and come to collective decisions

Questions to think about

- What steps will you take to make sure that the ideas and interests of youth researchers are included in these initial stages?
- How will you encourage youth researchers to think through ethical considerations and think about ethical practice within their own research?
- Who will take specific responsibilities at the different stages of the research?
- What basic research methods will you need to facilitate with the youth researchers? How will you find good data (what is good data)?

Example

Within one research project the youth researchers shared that they wanted to improve the condition of the school toilets. This was a great place to start, and the youth researchers used playdoh to build models of toilets whilst discussing the changes needed. This allowed youth researchers to think about what they appreciated about the toilets and what they thought needed improvement. One youth researcher even made a 'king loo' which was full of extra special details. The technical researcher wrote important details from the conversation on post-it notes and stuck them on a nearby wall. After 30 minutes there were many notes, and the youth researchers began to group the ideas together.

The youth researchers decided that cleanliness covered 'toilet roll on the floor' and 'pee on the seat', whilst socialising covered the concern of 'more than one pupil in a cubicle' and 'using the toilets instead of going out' in the rain at lunch time. By grouping ideas, the youth researchers could see what they felt was of most concern and decide as a group how to ask other pupils about these concerns too. This exploratory 'chat and create' meant that the youth researchers easily shared 'what they already knew' and could use this to inform 'what they want to find out'.

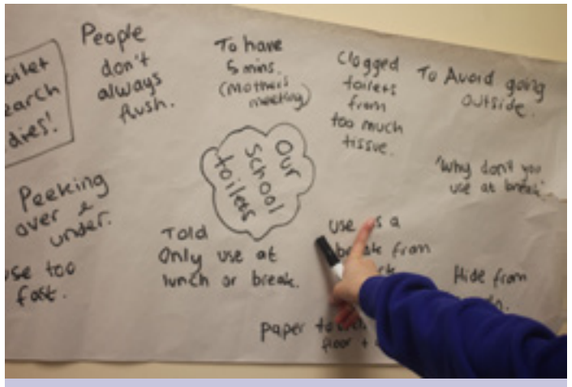


Figure 6 *'Our school toilets'*

Step two - What do we want to know?

This stage of the research is about deciding what elements of the issue or topic that you want to know more about. Youth researchers can collaborate on ideas and share decisions about what research questions to ask and which methods to employ to collect data.

How will we find out about this?

You will need to set the research questions and choose a method to gather data about the topic. You will need to consider:

- Trialing out research methods within the session so that the youth researchers have options to choose from.
- Detail who could be potential participants.
- Explore how they will work in an ethical manner to collect data.
- Consider timescales and costs of data collection methods.

How do we gather additional insights?

You will need to work with youth researchers to work out who will be their participants and how they will gather data.

- Identify participants and if any will be needed outside of the research group (e.g. peers, teachers, other staff). Discuss how will you invite them to participate.
- Discuss what level of involvement youth researchers want in the data collection (e.g. some youth researchers may want to remain anonymous in wider school)
- Explore whether youth researchers can collect data without a technical researcher present.
- Discuss the level of help you will need from gatekeepers to do data collection in school.

Questions to think about

How will you analyse data with youth researchers?

- How will you know youth researchers are ready, and willing, to conduct research with participants?
- Do youth researchers want to use qualitative (arts based inquiry, interviews, explorations of feelings and perspectives) or quantitative (numerical-based research including surveys, some observations) research methods?

Example

Working with youth researchers to think through how they want to conduct the research is usually the most fun part. They often have great ideas about questions to ask, and how to ask them, quickly building up a collection of ways to find out information from participants. Youth researchers within one secondary school wanted to keep their input in the research somewhat anonymous from other pupils. They created an online questionnaire that described 'a group of pupils undertaking research', that gave the youth researchers a level of anonymity. Additionally, they included safeguarding protocols, codenames for participants and avenues of contact if any participants had any concerns that extensively covered the anonymity and confidentiality for participants. The youth researchers worked together to word the questions appropriately and include both closed and open questions where participants could add further information if they wished. The questionnaire was created within one session, and then a university survey platform was used to build it in order to meet data protection standards. The pupil researchers worked with the Headteacher to determine how and when the online questionnaire would be shared. When the questionnaire had closed, the adult researcher printed off a report for each pupil researcher to read through and highlight the findings that they thought were most important to share with the wider school.

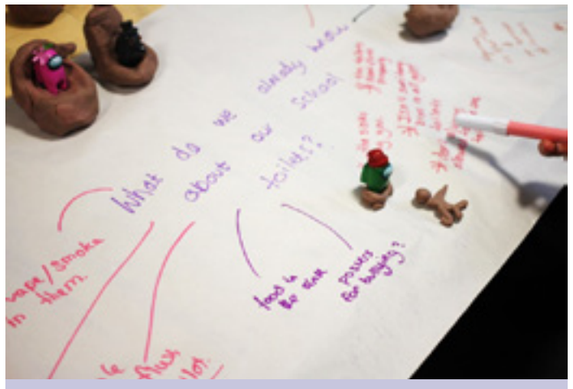


Figure 7 *Pupil researchers in a research session*

Step three - What have we found out and how we will share this?

The final stages of the research are about deciding what the youth researchers find out and what they want to share from the findings. Youth researchers can determine if the data aligns with the original discussions about the issue or if they have discovered some new insights. Youth researchers have presented to staff in senior leadership team (SLT) meetings and have also created a video with findings about school toilets that hoped to encourage more respectful use. Both were valid and insightful explorations and dissemination of research findings; it is up to your co-research team to determine the best approach for your research findings.

Analysing the findings

Work with youth researchers to analyse their findings. You should consider:

- Is there capacity for youth researchers to do a full analysis of the findings or does the technical researcher need to do some preliminary work initially?
- What themes are evident within the data and what do the youth researchers find most revealing?

What have we found out?

This part of the research can be a really encouraging step for youth researchers. The findings are crucial for the youth researchers to be able to share their ideas and to build a bigger picture of the issues or topic within the wider school. Working with youth researchers to pull out the key points is important at this stage.

- What do the findings tell us?
- What key points do youth researchers identify within the findings?

How can we inform others?

Once the data has been collated and analysed, the technical researcher and youth researchers can decide what format is most suitable to share the findings.

- What do they want to achieve with their findings?
- What do youth researchers want to share from the research findings? Who and how do they want to share the findings with?
- Will visual or creative methods enable youth researchers to reach a suitable audience?

Questions to think about

Are there any dissemination commitments or format considerations that are required by the funder, school, or otherwise?

- How will you follow youth researchers' wishes in regard to anonymity in research dissemination?
- How will you explore with youth researchers the most appropriate, and comfortable, way for them to disseminate their research?

Example

During one research project with youth researchers in a primary school, the youth researchers had claimed ownership of the research throughout the project and called themselves the 'research buddies'. They spoke to other pupils about the research and what they hoped to achieve with the research findings. The youth researchers conducted questionnaires amongst peers and the adult researcher worked with them to analyse the findings. They found that most pupils agreed with their questions about mis-use of the toilets and were concerned about pupils not respecting each other when in the toilet spaces. The youth researchers were excited about making a film to share with other pupils and staff about the research findings that would help their peers understand all perspectives and encourage improving the standards of the toilets. The video shared examples of respectful toilet use, and these findings were disseminated throughout the whole school.

When it came to further sharing the research, the Headteacher suggested an assembly, where they would share the research findings amongst all year groups. The youth researchers agreed to this and spent a lot of time creating the content and practising their assembly. On the day of the assembly the youth researchers were nervous, and very quiet, when presenting their work on stage. Although they wanted to share their research, they lost confidence in what they wanted to say. A few weeks later the same youth researchers shared their research at a university conference and showed great confidence in their presentation. The youth researchers explained that they had felt embarrassed and awkward presenting to their peers. Although we could not have known the impact of this before the assembly, it highlighted how important it is to really think through where and how youth researchers will share their work.

Figure 8 Pupil researchers presenting at York St John University

Phase C – Concluding the research project

The final stage of the research is important to understand how the youth researchers have experienced the process of engaging with research, and how to bring the project to a close. Participatory research encourages the development of respectful and trusting relationships (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher, 2009) and it isn't unusual for youth researchers to share emotional reactions to the research ending. Acknowledging the time spent together and exploring the experience with youth researchers can be done through a final group workshop held at the end of the project.

Sparking discussions about research engagement

Included in this document is a guide to using an emotion word resource (Appendix 4), which has been used by technical researchers to explore with youth researchers how they experienced the different elements of the research process. Technical researchers can create a list of questions or prompts about the research (e.g. What did it feel like to become a youth researcher? How did you feel asking peers about the issue?) and use the word bank (Appendix 5) to encourage everyone engaged with the research to reflect upon the process. You could use the emotion word resource to explore:

- How youth researchers felt about the process of engaging in each stage of the research.
- What youth researchers might do differently if they were to engage with research in the future.
- Why youth researchers chose to engage with the research.
- Any areas that youth researchers felt were an important/critical part of the time together (e.g. youth researchers in one project wished to discuss at length the way they had been recruited to the project).

It is suggested that a one-hour session is arranged out of timetable with the youth researchers to evaluate the project and the impact, and to say goodbye to the youth researchers.

Further sharing of the research

At this stage there may be other places the youth researchers would like to share their work or their experience. In a recent project the youth researchers showed an interest in publishing their work through the university. This was made possible by asking them to write a blog for the journal of participatory research methods (see Claudie, Emma, Noah and Caitlin, 2025). The contact continued via email and was heavily reliant upon a supportive gatekeeper to keep the contact between the parties. A blog post or collective writing session would be possible if the technical researcher was able to visit the setting on another occasion and any way to collectively share findings and experiences that interests the youth researchers should be explored on an individual basis.

Goodbyes

Each project will differ regarding what the youth researchers will wish to achieve and what they see as valuable about engaging with the research. Some projects or schools may wish to offer incentives at the end of projects, such as vouchers, to pupils who engage. When finances have allowed, in previous projects youth researchers have enjoyed celebration events at the university in which they present their research and have been presented with university certificates of achievement (Appendix 6). This has been an excellent way to mark the end of the project.

Questions to think about

- Have I made it possible for all pupil researchers to share what they want about the research process.
- Do the co-research group wish to share their work further and do I have the capacity to do so?
- Will I acknowledge the pupil researchers' time and contributions to the research in a formal way.
- Have I made it clear what happens after the research project?

Example

Within a research project as part of our final session the youth researchers used the emotion words and discussion to write a piece of collective writing. This writing entitled 'Dear Headteacher' (Appendix 7) became a way to finalise our sessions, they understood their project was coming to an end, but they were able to create a lasting legacy that would be used within future research. They wrote the letter as a call to gatekeepers and other adults about creating more opportunities to engage with research in schools. They hoped that, although the project had ended, their work would continue to inform other practitioners and influence participatory co-research within schools moving forward.

Conclusion

This guide has been designed to help you carry out a research project with youth researchers in schools. We have provided a range of ideas and resources to help you succeed. However, working in a participatory manner with young people can be unpredictable and requires you to think on your feet and a commitment to ethical practice. For example, the youth researchers might decide they don't want to take part but for safeguarding reasons they must stay with you in the session. At this point you might allow them to do something different in the room, so they are able to withdraw their consent but stay safe.

Equally it is important to recognise that schools have their own rules and culture, which is why it is important to establish a good working relationship early on. There will be times where you need to navigate balancing the needs of the young people and the requirements of the school. For example, in one project the teacher requested the names of students that the youth researchers had seen vaping. The youth researchers said no as this went against their ethical code, however the adult researcher had to step in and back them up in front of the teacher.

Ideally this type of research will secure change within the school community environment or even further afield with the youth researchers using their findings to negotiate with the staff and their peers. If they do secure change that is something to celebrate but also be prepared to work with disappointment if such change does not occur. It is important to talk about goals and expectations from the beginning of the project and to continue to revisit these throughout.

However, don't be put off, working with children and young people is one of the greatest privileges and they will always surprise you with their insights and ideas. We would love to hear from you about your project and how we might improve this guide.

Alice Little and Charlotte Haines Lyon

For any questions or comments about this report please contact:

Dr Charlotte Haines Lyon
School of Education, Language and Psychology
York St John University, Lord Mayors Walk, York. YO31 7EX
Email: c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk

References

Allen, R. E. S., & Wiles, J. L. (2016). A rose by any other name: Participants choosing research pseudonyms. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *13*(2), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1133746

Barnikis, T., MacNevin, M., & Berman, R. (2019). Participatory research with children: Critical reflections. In: Berson, I. R., Berson, M. J. & Gray, C. (eds.). Participatory methodologies to elevate children's voice and agency. Charlotte, NC: IAP.

Claudie, Emma, Noah and Caitlin (2025). 'Youth co-researchers reflect on their experiences with participatory research'. *Journal of participatory research methods.* https://jprm.scholasticahq.com/post/2943-youth-co-researchers-reflect-on-their-experiences-with-participatory-research

Crook, D. J. (2021). Children changing spaces, changing schools. Children & Society, 35(3), 445–460. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12429

Edwards, V. (2020) 'A case of ethics'. Accessed on 10 April 2025 https://www.exchangewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/05/A-Case-of-Ethics.pdf

Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. Journal of Educational Change, 2(2), 123–141. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017949213447

Gallagher, M., Haywood, S. L., Jones, M. W., & Milne, S. (2010). Negotiating informed consent with children in school- based research: A critical review. *Children & Society*, *24*(6), 471–482. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00240

Haines Lyon, C., Little, A., Dobson, E., Glover, O., Patterson, J., Telford, J., & Noret, N. (2024). Toilet talk: using a students as researchers approach to problematize and co-construct school toilet policy and practice. *Gender and Education*, *36*(7), 801–816. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2024.2389108

Kellett, M. (2005). Children as active researchers: a new research paradigm for the 21st century? ESRC, UK.

Kellett, M. (2011). Empowering children and young people as researchers: Overcoming barriers and building capacity. Child Indicators Research, 4(2), 205–219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-010-9103-1

Kirby, P. (2020). 'It's never okay to say no to teachers': Children's research consent and dissent in conforming schools contexts. British Educational Research Journal, 46(4), 811–828. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3638

Little, A. (2025). The 'Dear Researcher' workshop on participatory research spaces at the BERA 2024 conference: Insights and practical examples of researching with youth co-researchers. Accessed 10 April 2025,https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-dear-researcher-workshop-on-participatory-research-spaces-at-the-bera-2024-conference-insights-and-practical-examples-of-researching-with-youth-co-researchers

Lomax, H.; Smith, K. and Walsh, B. (2020). CHEER digital resources. University of Huddersfield. https://doi.org/10.34696/es1k-0976

Moore, T. P., McArthur, M., & Noble-Carr, D. (2018). More a marathon than a hurdle: Towards children's informed consent in a study on safety. Qualitative Research, 18(1), 88–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117700708

Proefke, R., & Barford, A. (2023). Creating spaces for co-research. *Journal of the British Academy*, *11*, 19–42. https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s3.019

Stride, A., Brazier, R., & Fitzgerald, H. (2022). Misguided and modest: Reflections of our youth voice research. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.824953

Tisdall, K., Davis, J., & Gallagher, M (2009). *Researching with children and young people.* London: Sage.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Further Reading

- Edwards, V. (2020) 'A case of ethics'. Accessed on 10 April 2025 https://www.exchangewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/05/A-Case-of-Ethics.pdf
- Gallagher, M., Haywood, S. L., Jones, M. W., & Milne, S. (2010). Negotiating informed consent with children in school-based research: A critical review. *Children & Society*, *24*(6), 471–482. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00240
- Kellett, M. (2005). Children as active researchers: a new research paradigm for the 21st century? ESRC, UK.
- Kirby, P. (2020). 'It's never okay to say no to teachers': Children's research consent and dissent in conforming schools contexts. *British Educational Research Journal*, *46*(4), 811–828. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3638
- Little, A (2025) The 'Dear Researcher' workshop on participatory research spaces at the BERA 2024 conference: Insights and practical examples of researching with youth co-researchers. Accessed 10 April 2025,https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-dear-researcher-workshop-on-participatory-research-spaces-at-the-bera-2024-conference-insights-and-practical-examples-of-researching-with-youth-co-researchers
- Stride, A., Brazier, R., & Fitzgerald, H. (2022). Misguided and modest: Reflections of our youth voice research. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.824953
- Whittington, E (2019) Co-producing and Navigating Consent in Participatory Research with Young People. *Journal of Children's Services*, 14 (3). pp. 205-216. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-02-2019-0007

Appendicies

Appendix 1 - *Project timeline for peer research in schools*

YOUR RIGHTS IN RESEARCH

(modified from Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr, 2018)
Modified by A. Little (2023)

We want you to feel that when you engage with our research you have choices, are protected and that we value and respect your contributions.

You have the right to have your say.
We believe that children and young people should be involved in any research that focuses on them.

You have the right to privacy.
You can chose how you are identified in the work we create together.

You have the right to participate in a way that you like.
It is up to you if you get involved and how you want to participate in the research.

You have the right to be treated well and not get hurt.
We will respect you for who you are and work together to make sure nobody experiences any harm during the research.

You have the right to be informed.
We want you to fully understand everything that we do together. We will develop ways to make sure everyone is able to discuss and understand.

You have the right to confidentiality.
If you tell us about something that affects your safety we will have to share this information. It will be your choice about what you would like to share about the research.

You have the right to benefit from the research.
We want you to gain skills and enjoy working as part of our research team. You will receive a gift or voucher for participating.

You have the right to stop participating.
At any time during the research you can stop working with us. You will still receive any payment or gift offered.

You have the right to not be discriminated against.
We will not treat people badly because of who they are or where they come from.

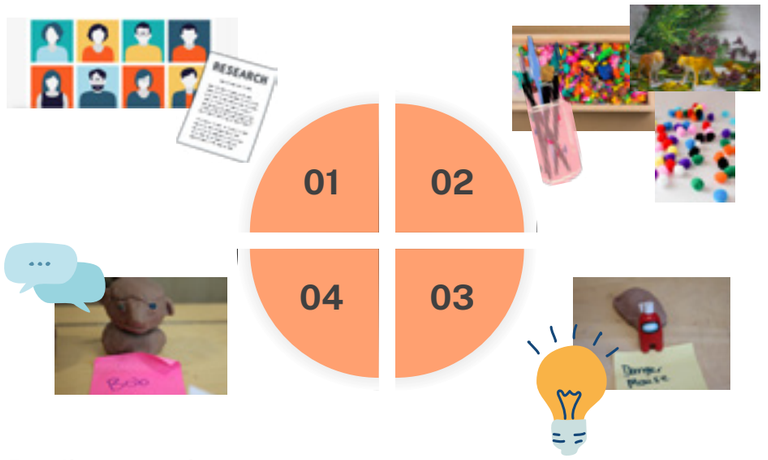
You also have the right to speak up if you are unhappy with the research. Talk to us, your teachers or use the contact details above.

A GUIDE TO CHOOSING

Research Avatars

Offering pupil researchers a chance to choose a research avatar can be a creative way to discuss and develop understandings about pseudonyms and anonymity.

A range of materials, resources and characters could be used. Figures, play dough, LEGO can all be adapted by pupil researchers to create a form of representation.



Pupil researchers can use their avatars, or pseudonyms throughout the research and to develop their understanding of ethical principles within research. Ownership of the research can then be developed through the avatars if the pupil researchers wish.

Encourage the pupil researchers to make or choose an avatar, or decide upon a pseudonym. As a group you can then explore what they can represent and why this 'naming' is an important consideration within research.

UNDERSTANDING CO-RESEARCH SPACES

THIS GUIDE EXPLORES HOW EMOTION WORDS CAN BE USED AS A TOOL TO ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION ABOUT CO-RESEARCH SPACES.

1. IDENTIFY PROMPTS AND KEY LEARNING MOMENTS

Identify questions and key learning moments from your time together as a co-research team. Questions that consider the experience of creating a co-research space such as, 'What does it feel like to engage as a co-researcher?' can be useful starting points to encourage a range of perspectives.

2. INTRODUCE EMOTION WORDS

Once prompts or questions have been decided upon, researchers can use emotion words as a resource for encouraging discussion and reflection. The accompanying word bank is intended to help articulate everyone's experience of engaging with a co-research space. Include blank paper for people to contribute words to the word bank.

3. DISCUSS AND EXPLORE TOGETHER

Encourage anyone who feels comfortable to expand upon their choice of words. What do you want people to know about the experience of co-creating research? What is important to share and how can we keep talking about these elements of co-research spaces and practice?

4. COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY

Once you've identified the emotion words and expanded upon these, can you work together to share your insights. Youth researchers have engaged in research conversations building upon their identified emotions, drawn doodles relating to the words and collaborated on a 'Dear Researcher' letter highlighting factors they considered important in collaborative research spaces. What could your co-research team create to spread the word?

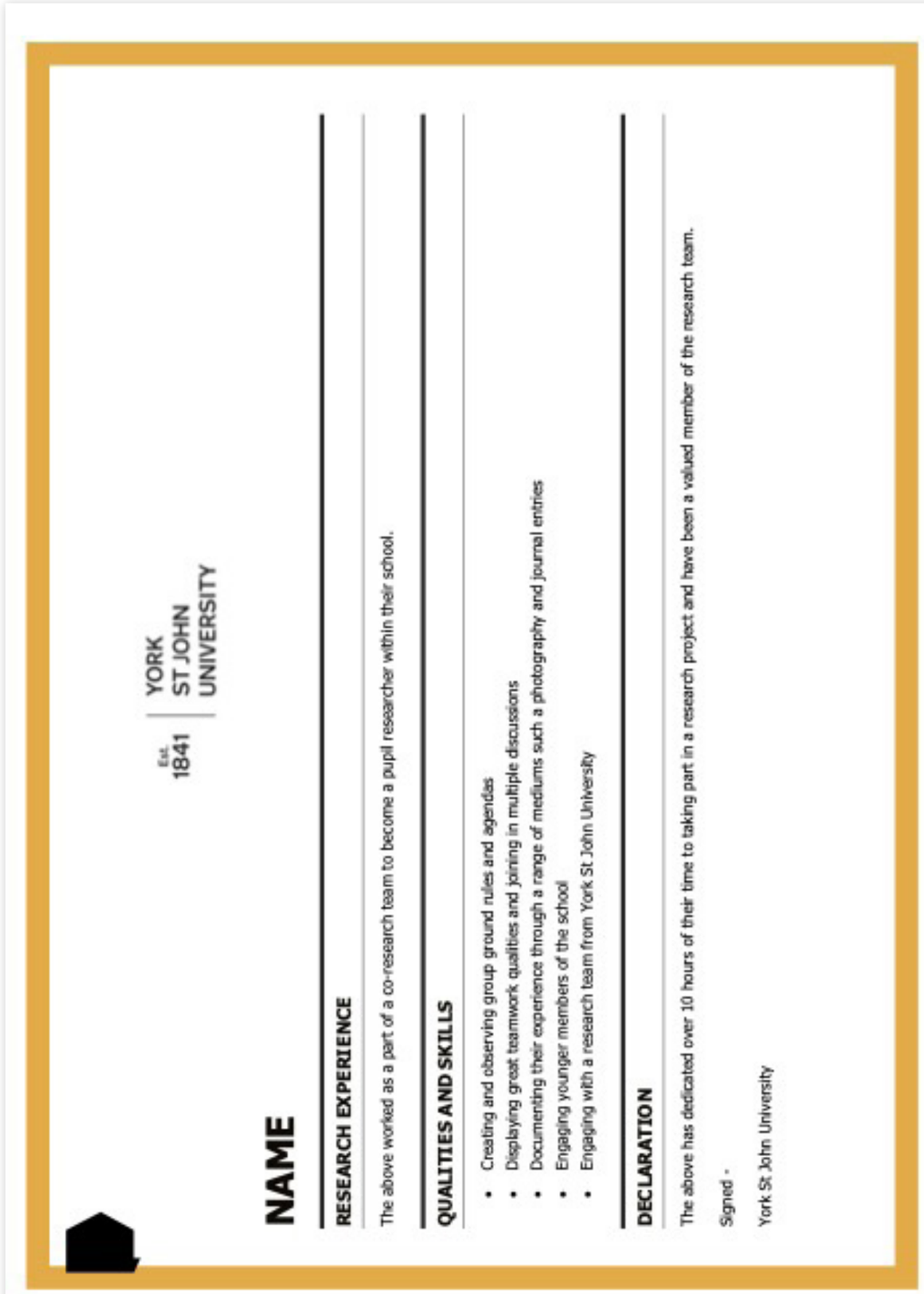
Appendix 4 - Understanding co-research space emotions resource

WORD BANK

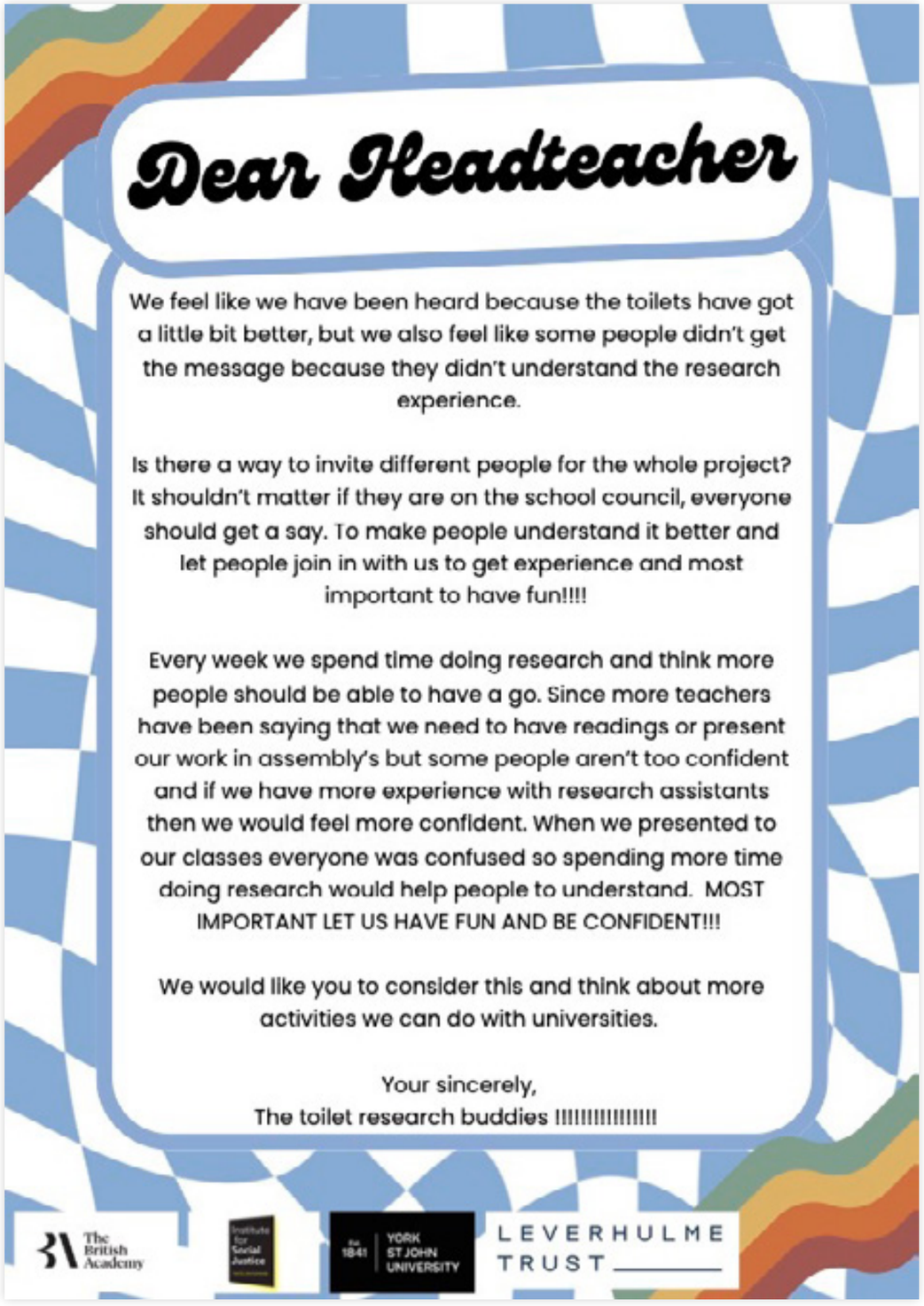
Valued	Sad
Hopeful	Annoyed
Safe	Powerless
Heard	Worried
Comfortable	Confused
Fortunate	Overwhelmed
Trusted	A bit silly
Privileged	Stuck
Encouraged	Angry
Included	Unsupported
Inspired	Awkward
Excited	Frustrated
Express yourself	Let Down
Respected	Vulnerable
Confident	Misunderstood
Motivated	Anxious
Empowered	Deceived
Purposeful	Embarrassed
Knowledgeable	Bored
Engaged	Lacking purpose
Challenged	Connected
Supported	Nervous
Equipped	Ignored
Up-skilled	Weird
Royal	Proud
Independent	Seen
Happy	Part of a team
Perspective-changing	Shy
Understanding yourself	Lost
Surprised	Scared
Ill-equipped	Over-joyed
Flustered	Upset
Intimidated	Had fun
	Overthinking

Modified from HIS (2020) https://www.hisengage.scot/equipping-professionals/participation-toolkit/emotional-touchpoints/

Appendix 5 - Word bank to use with emotion word resource



Appendix 6- Youth Researcher certificate template



Appendix 7 - Dear Headteacher letter

The British Academy

LEVERHULME TRUST

Est. 1841

YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Institute for Social Justice

York St John University