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Toilet talk: using a students as researchers approach to problematize and co-construct school toilet policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

School toilets, globally and historically, have been problematic as places of shame and bullying, often providing pupils with inadequate facilities. This participatory student research project sought to develop political agency with youth researchers, equipping them with research skills to develop a project about school toilets, and to help challenge and shape their school's policy and practice. By applying Sara Ahmed's concepts of willful subjects (2014) and complaint (2021) to the data, we begin to question who can use school toilets as expected. Often fear, disgust and restrictions encourage, if not force, disabled, menstruating, transgender and gender diverse students, to contravene toilet norms, and be considered willful. We worked with student researchers to problematize issues and explore the potential for more effective policies. We argue it is imperative to use feminist pedagogy to challenge toilet policy and practice, with children and young people, to achieve wider social justice in education.

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Introduction

School toilets are nearly universally complained about with problems of access, inadequate and insanitary facilities, and lack of safety and privacy often cited (Burton 2013; Jewkes and O'Connor 1990; Lundblad and Hellström 2005; Muhati-Nyakundi 2022; Norling et al. 2016; Upadhyay, Mathai, and Reed 2008). Commonly there is a concern that children and young people are unable to meet expectations and follow the rules for going to the toilet (Lundblad, Hellström, and Berg 2009). However, such rules and expectations are often based on heteronormative, cis-normative, ableist, male and neoliberal norms (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2019). In this project, our focus was to challenge the view that it is children and young people who are the problem, and have faulty bodies or minds, which might be deemed as 'willful' (Ahmed 2014), 'unwilling'

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to fit in with school expectations of toilet use. Rather, we sought to use a feminist pedagogical approach to explore the structural problems at play with the young researchers, before working with them to develop solutions.

Recent English school protests about stringent toilet policies, including physical barriers preventing access to toilets (Fazackerley 2023; Woodcock 2023), have emphasized how school toilet rules are emblematic of the wider discipline debate in schools. As Chris Bagley (2023) notes 'erecting barricades that block children from accessing toilets is a visible symptom of a failed system'. Zero tolerance behaviour policies are increasingly implemented in the United States and England which can further marginalize groups of young people (Clarke et al. 2021). Specifically, we argue that such toilet policy and practice further marginalize girls, disabled students, transgender and gender diverse students.

In a bid to challenge poor toilet policy and practice, whilst embracing the agency and voice of young people in schools, we created the project Toilet Talk with the aim of co-constructing socially just toilet policies and practice. To effectively problematize toilet policy and practice with young people and to move towards co-constructing more socially just schooling, we drew on Sara Ahmed's (2021) concept of feminist pedagogy via complaint, which will be discussed. It was imperative to work with the young people to not only identify problems but to navigate the power dynamics to work effectively with staff and to work towards change.

We sought to examine how young people can work with schools to develop toilet policy and practice that is safe, health and socially just. Collaborating with students and engaging with work to establish young people as researchers, we followed a democratic methodology that explored:

1. How do young people experience school toilets?
2. How can schools effectively co-construct ethical toilet policy and practice?

This article discusses the project, the challenges that were presented and the key learning we must take forward.

Literature review

The problem with toilets

Various studies have shown that adverse toilet experiences, when young, can lead to children internalizing unhealthy toilet practices which continue to shape their adult experiences and can lead to urinary, bowel and other health issues (Camenga et al. 2019; Lundblad and Hellström 2005). Arguably, such internalization is an aim of schools; toilets are disciplinary spaces that teach children how to behave and 'civilize' young bodies (Millei and Cliff 2014; Slater, Jones, and Procter 2019). This disciplinary internalization, Slater, Jones, and Procter (2019) argue, makes it clear to children whose bodies function as desired and whose don't, and thus school toilets become a key civilizing space, ensuring children know how to behave in school. Toilet policy and practice are thus indicative of far-ranging issues of social justice (Plaskow 2008).

Children are often prohibited visiting the toilet during lessons for a range of reasons including the need to focus on work, the fear of misbehaviour outside the classroom, and safeguarding concerns (Camenga et al. 2019). On the other hand, there is also evidence of children restricting their use of the toilet due to not wanting to miss the lesson (Camenga et al. 2019), inadequate design (Millei and Cliff 2014), the fear of what might happen in the toilets, e.g. bullying (Norling et al. 2016), embarrassment at asking to go in front of a class (Lundblad, Hellström, and Berg 2009), lack of privacy (Tatlow-Golden et al. 2017), the use of toilets as social space (Burton 2013) and disgust at insanitary facilities (Lundblad and Hellström 2005; von Gontard et al. 2017). Whilst it may make sense to go to the toilet in breaks, breaks are often too short to complete other tasks or to even get to other side of the school in time for lessons (Lundblad, Hellström, and Berg 2009).

There is additional controversy around gendered toilets in the US and the UK which is heteronormative and stigmatizing to transgender and gender diverse students (Eckes 2017; Francis et al. 2022; Jones and Slater 2020). As a result of these realities, toilets and students (and arguably staff) are policed as demonstrated by numerous newspaper articles and highlighted in complaints on parents' social media groups (see Jones and Slater 2020). This is a further example of particular bodies being seen as problematic.

Willful bodies

Ahmed (2014, 97) draws on Rousseau's Social Contract in which to be free one must ignore their will and submit to that of the general will of society; to not do so and to pursue one's will is to be considered 'willful'. Ahmed argues that to submit to the general will, is to understand oneself as part of an institutional body, in this case the school body, and be willing to align themselves with the body's behaviour. Furthermore, one mustn't simply put their will aside in favour of the general will but rather, the individual will must be eliminated (Ahmed 2014, 65). To not submit to this logic is to risk disrupting the welfare and education of others; willfulness, it appears, is not only a danger to oneself but to the wider school and society (Ahmed 2014). To be physically or mentally unable to submit to this will (expected toileting norms) is to not only be willful but to be perceived as a danger.

Importantly for this article, however, Ahmed (2014) identifies not only a general will but also a 'national will' to which the wider body must submit. Within this context, we understand the 'national will' to be the neoliberal school system to which the staff and governors must submit to. We recognize that not only must students comply with the school will, but the school must comply with the national will. Thus, at no point are we blaming any individual school for unhealthy toilet behaviour; we recognize problematic policies and practices can stem from expectations of the government, such as England's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), the regulatory body for schools in England, where this research was conducted.

To be willful is 'not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied' (Ahmed 2014, 15); a willful person does not fit the expected norms and many students are cast as willful due to their bodies not functioning as desired. In the case of school toilets, the norms expected in schools, 'both inform school toilet design and

practice, and perpetuate normative discourses of childhood as middle-class, white, "able", heteronormative, cissexist and inferior to adulthood' (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2019, 412). The lens of willfulness is thus useful to analyse the data around the barriers students face regarding toilet use in schools.

Agency

Toilet policies and practice are often determined by adults in response to the perceived need to protect children. For example, the debate on gender-neutral toilets is often framed around protecting vulnerable girls and women from boys and men (Jones and Slater 2020), or the need for gender-neutral toilets caused by the needs of a vulnerable minority (Francis et al. 2022). Toilets, and policies around their use, are often designed to protect children from bullying or the school from poor behaviour, yet without children and young people's involvement in the design they can be lacking (Burton 2013). Whilst we recognize the importance of safeguarding children and young people, there is a risk that the protection of young people without engaging their agency vulnerabilizes young people further (Brown 2014; McBride and Neary 2021). As Tisdall and Kay (2017) argue, vulnerability narratives can further stigmatize those already marginalized, but participatory work can lessen the vulnerability and strengthen the agency and voice of those perceived at risk. We argue that to effectively safeguard children and young people, it essential to involve them in the development of best practice, and that 'the refusal to accept that children and young people are competent witnesses to their own lives has confined them to a state of impotency, at the mercy of adults' (Hill et al. 2004, 84).

To disrupt the vulnerability narrative necessitates problematizing power dynamics and working with young people to see themselves as something other than vulnerable (Tisdall and Kay 2017). We therefore drew on Ahmed's (2021) concept of feminist pedagogy, in which the process of complaining illuminates mechanisms of institutional power. Ahmed (2021) argues institutions hear someone's complaint as noise and locate the problem with the person rather than the institution; often when young people complain about school toilets, the students are blamed rather than wider school and structural issues. This phenomenon was seen in response to the multiple school protests about access to school toilets in England during February 2023, many of which were filmed and uploaded to social media by pupils. There was much concern about the 'state of the youth today' rather than questioning why there were barriers and cameras in, and around, school toilets (Fazackerley 2023; Silverman 2023; Woodcock 2023). There is minimal toilet research focussing on the agency of children and young people (Senior 2014), assuming they can contribute and indeed change school toilet policy and practice.

Drawing upon the critical pedagogy tradition, we centred young people as part of the solution, enabling them to engage with real life issues, to question and challenge power relations and social inequalities (Malik 2022). By do so we challenged the narrative of only adults can conduct research and address the problem of school toilets. We aimed to equip school students with research skills to carry out their own research project about school toilets, enabling them to produce evidence to challenge and improve toilet policy and practice. Whilst critical pedagogical research involves participatory work to analyse the world we live in and to take action (Cahill et al. 2019), we realized there would be an additional element within this work, complaint. We wanted the young people to

present their research and work with school staff to co-construct solutions; however, we knew due to the power dynamics between pupils and teachers in the English school system, it would be difficult, and found Ahmed's (2021), concept of complaint as feminist pedagogy useful. Too often, the complainant is blamed, in the case of school toilets, the students and the young people when raising the problem with toilets are seen as the problem – as will be seen later. We hoped that students complaining with evidence, increased the chance of being heard and affording change. Such a feminist pedagogical approach emphasizes agency and co-construction, but also the refusal to place the complainants as the location of blame. In the discussion section, it will become evident that this is not so easy.

Methodology

This study is framed within the emerging field of Democratic Methodologies. Whilst this was not action research, our approach was closely linked to Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) which often aims to develop critical consciousness in young people (Anderson et al. 2021). As Dobson's (2023) systematic review of YPAR highlights, consciousness raising is a common outcome for young people. Democratic methodologies embrace a range of methodologies and methods, to further democracy, whether at a macro or micro level. Whilst democratic methodologists don't align to one particular view of democracy, a common aim is to disrupt power relations, and to prioritize amplifying marginalized of voices (Haines Lyon, Ralls, and Stuart 2021).

Often democratic research includes participatory methods, which can involve extra labour with institutional ethics committees, and gatekeepers, to persuade them of the viability and validity of such work. Kellett et al. (2005; 2011) found that barriers to youth led participatory research included adult preconceptions about competency, and whether young people were perceived to have legitimate knowledge, or sufficient understanding to be researchers. The ethics committees of our respective institutions were concerned that young people were not trustworthy in terms of conducting research with their peers about toilets. Toilets seemed a dangerous subject that parents might complain about. To counter the committees' concerns, we made some changes to the original plan.

Originally, we aimed to work with 14- and 15-year-olds in a secondary school setting but we raised the age group to 16- and 17-year-olds in a sixth-form setting to test our processes and satisfy the ethics committee, with a view to learning and running similar studies with younger cohorts in the future. We employed Alice, who was experienced in working with participatory approaches to research and young people. We were then able to gain ethical approval, on the condition we applied for extra approval at each stage of the project; due to the nature of a participatory project, we couldn't predict all the activities. We negotiated the pseudonymization and naming of the school and students involved. The school and some participants have been given pseudonyms. The three male student researchers, Elliot, Oscar and Joshua, contributed to the design of the project, helped with analysis and reporting results to their schools, and further afield as discussed later.

We approached schools and colleges in Yorkshire, the largest county in the UK, situated in the North of England with a wide rural landscape interspersed with cities often with high deprivation. One school, Enterprise Academy, was recruited after recently completing their 'student voice' questionnaire within their sixth form which highlighted

concerns about toilets.[1] The Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Atkinson, expressed a desire to follow up authentically on the areas the students were highlighting as problematic within the setting, with toilets being a reoccurring issue. Enterprise Academy, situated on the outskirts of a city, comprised nearly 1500 students at the time of the research, with a slightly below average number of students on government subsidized Free School Meals.

Over a 2-month period Alice worked with 6 students, aged 17 (3 young men) and 18 (3 young women), at Enterprise Academy. The school offered sessions within form time, equating to 25-minute slots twice a week. The research team was aware of how this allocated time could be inimical to creating a rich, democratic environment for working with young people to become researchers (Morrison 2008). However, we also knew we had to develop a research model that could fit with time-poor schools. Alice worked within the sessions as a 'research methods teacher' (Thomson and Gunter 2011, 23), ensuring the young people were provided with sufficient information to make informed decisions about each stage of the research project (Kellett et al. 2005). Twelve workshop style sessions were conducted within the 25-minute form time, the first included explanation of the project, and gaining informed consent from the young people, there were two further extended sessions where the young people gave up their free periods dedicating time to finalizing the survey and analysing the results.

Each session began with an introduction about the session aims, followed by a group discussion and the identification of the follow-up outcomes. Whilst the adult research team set the topic of school toilets in the knowledge that school toilets are a universal problem, they were open to how the young people would interpret that. Alice worked with the student researchers to design and develop a project to examine the 'toilet issues' within their sixth form; the student researchers highlighted the areas they thought were key to understanding the toilets within their setting. The student researchers identified that the use of toilets as a social space was seen as problematic, and that often the toilets were not fit for purpose. Collectively, they designed a survey that was distributed in their sixth form and gathered the insights of other sixth-form attendees. The students applied for and gained ethical approval with Alice and sent out the survey via email to nearly 200 sixth-form students. The student researchers gained 49 responses, which they then discussed and analysed together. At this point, the three female student researchers left the project to concentrate on their exams, and the three male student researchers whose exams were the following year, continued to work with Alice.

Throughout the process, the student researchers participated in discussions about research including methods, ethical considerations, youth voice and participation. The analysis of the project included some basic statistical analysis of the quantitative responses in the survey and working with the student researchers to identify issues of importance. This process involved the student researchers exploring the data and thinking about the issues that were concerning to them and needed to be addressed with the school. A final focus group with Elliot, Oscar and Joshua was held to discuss how they had found working in this way with Alice, and what we could draw upon for future work in this area.

How do young people experience school toilets?

Inadequate and insanitary facilities

The survey designed by the student researchers for their peers, comprised open and closed questions, and was completed by 49 of the sixth-form students (aged 16–18), of whom 59% respondents identified as female, 39% male, and 2% as transgender male students. Results from the survey highlight problems with school toilets, namely cleanliness and functioning of the toilets, the exclusionary nature of their design in schools, and the social use of them alienating other students, thus demonstrating the need for further investigation and more importantly action.

As one respondent reported, 'urine up the walls and doors, locks rarely work, sinks rarely work, toilets always blocked, no paper towels'. Additionally, 42% of students reported toilets are unclean and unhygienic with one student commenting that there is 'usually blood is some places'. The students highlighted unsatisfactory provision of sanitary bins and only 30% of respondents thought the toilets were hygienic. Unsatisfactory provision of sanitary bins for period products causes problems for menstruating students and these are often only present in female toilets. This adds to the sense that menstruating students are something other, willful, due to their need to sometimes disrupt lessons, or go to different toilets to find the necessary facilities. Transgender male students and menstruating non-binary students who cannot find a sanitary bin in the gender-neutral or male toilets, are also marked as willful and different; they are not able to conform to the general will and use the expected toilet, without difficulties or embarrassment.

Access to toilets

Access to toilets was a dominant issue; 23% of student participants in the student survey said toilets were inaccessible, with two reporting that the 'disabled' toilets were inaccessible due to other students using them for conversations. Four respondents were concerned about the lack of provision for gender diverse students; 'There has been no consideration as to the implementation of toilets for people struggling with their identity as to their gender specifically and I believe the disabled toilets are often used incorrectly leading to a lack of accessibility in the event that they may be needed' (participant quote). Another respondent commented, 'For those who identify as non-binary or transgender … there needs to be a space for them to access where they feel comfortable rather than just disabled toilets'. Whilst another said that 'If you do not identify as a certain gender there are only two toilets to use'. The default toilet for gender diverse people is often the accessible toilet for disabled people, which is problematic for a range of reasons not least there are not enough of them, but moreover, there is a cumulative effect of barriers for gender diverse students which contribute 'to a feeling of otherness, of difference and perceived hostility' (Mckendry and Lawrence 2017, 14). As Slater, Jones, and Procter (2019) argue, toilet policy and practice in schools is problematic. School toilets are thus emblematic of school cultures which create norms impossible for certain bodies to abide in, without feeling stigmatized and alienated.

Social space and lack of privacy

The student researchers were concerned about how the toilets were used as social space and therefore designed part of the survey around this element; 61% of respondents reported that they had seen toilets used as a social space, reporting regularly seeing people socialize, make phone calls, vape, and eat in the toilets. 35% of respondents said that there was not enough privacy, with many comments about not being able to lock doors, the fear of people walking in, or groups listening; one respondent said, 'there are often big groups of people talking in the toilets and vaping with some of them punching/kicking cubical walls', and another that they 'no longer consider the toilets private'. One student at Enterprise Academy described feeling unsafe.

Problems caused by poor toilet practice

Whilst these results maybe unsurprising to anyone who has used a school toilet, poor standards impede children and young people's use of toilets. 43% of student respondents in the Enterprise Academy survey reported that they avoid using the toilet, with comments suggesting this is due to overcrowding, lack of privacy and dirtiness. Arguably these findings are of concern and provide further evidence for the need for further research and importantly student voice around the issue. Children and young people often have poor experiences of toilets, due to the unsatisfactory access to often inadequate facilities or to the discomfort caused by others in the toilets. The different barriers faced by students when attempting to go to the toilet, impact particular bodies, especially girls, disabled students, transgender and gender diverse students. Using Sara Ahmed's (2014) concept of the willful subject, it could be argued that those unable to access toilets satisfactorily are unwilling to comply with the general or national will. These willful subjects are in fact often unable to comply, due to fear, disgust, embarrassment, non-compliant bodies and facilities. The conditions within school toilets, make it difficult to be willing and compliant especially for those who are disabled, menstruating or don't look like they belong.

How can schools effectively co-construct ethical toilet policy and practice?

Becoming student researchers

The school initially agreed to take part in the project after carrying out their own student voice survey in which 37 sixth-form students expressed dissatisfaction about the toilets. Mrs Atkinson, the head of sixth form, was keen to work with us and to improve the situation. She then arranged for students to meet with Alice to find out about the project and choose to take part if they wished. As discussed earlier, we started with six student researchers, but three female youth researchers left halfway through to concentrate on their final exams.

As the project started it became evident that the students who had been selected to attend that first meeting were invited by Mrs Atkinson due them being part of the complaining cohort in schools the original students' voice survey. They said, 'you all said there was something wrong, you now have a chance to do something about it'' (Elliot, Focus group). This raised issues of trust (students thought that the survey was anonymous),

and choice (it would have been preferable for any students to be able to take part in the project). This is a clear example of Ahmed's (2021) point that complainants become responsible for fixing a complaint; for the students to problematize this process is part of feminist pedagogy.

As the student researchers identified, this led to researchers being biased towards thinking of toilets as a concern and there was a lack of students involved who had not expressed concern.

> There's only one thing that I thought could have been improved in terms of participants is our opinion on toilets quite biased. In our, in our group of like, researchers, it's only people who don't like the toilets, there's no, no even split. We can't talk to someone who likes the toilets and think about why? That's why we've got kind of like, we have the idea of, bad. (Josh, Focus group)

Whilst the concern of bias speaks to traditionally scientific research, rather than a concept to be problematized, the student researchers demonstrated critical reflection on their work and considered whose voices might be missing. The ability to critically reflect is a common outcome in Youth Participatory Research according to Dobson (2023) and should be considered when concern is expressed about young people's capacity to research.

The model of developing students as researchers proved effective in teaching the young people research skills, such as choosing methods and analysing data, as well as developing an awareness of how to explore school issues in a more democratic manner, through shared decision making and valuing collective input. Josh said 'I think by working together, you kind of get an insight into people … You start to understand yourself why you don't like it' (Focus group).

Ethical thinking and speaking to power

The sessions on research built upon the idea of shared knowledge and experience and led to very rich discussions, and a successful application to the university ethics committee. Within one session discussing research ethics and human rights, without prompting, students raised concerns about a totally anonymous survey. Faye said that if she reported an assault in the survey, she would want an appropriate adult to follow it up with her and offer support. Therefore, the student researchers designed a safeguarding mechanism, which was implemented as code names for participants, into the survey which whilst anonymous, afforded a transparent facility for Alice to track a student reporting a safeguarding concern. The safeguarding mechanism was explained within the consent process.

Later during the study, on hearing reports of vaping, the teacher requested that the researchers provide the names of students who were effectively breaking school rules. The student researchers argued they were bound by research ethics and could not share such information. They did, however, appreciate Alice being there at this point. Whilst the young researchers repeatedly demonstrated excellent ethical thinking skills, and the capability to research effectively, power dynamics within the school and ethical complexities were ever present. The vaping incident led to an 'ethically important moment' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), a moment that is beyond the official ethical approval, but one that reveals power dynamics and vulnerabilities. The adult researchers had underestimated how traditional school power dynamics might jeopardize

participatory research. We have now built in a longer process for working with future schools at the beginning of projects to try and ensure that staff understand the tensions between participatory research and everyday school workings.

The importance of an adult ally (Stride, Brazier, and Fitzgerald 2022) supporting students as they navigated power relationships and frustrations became clear. This is as important as the adult teaching research skills to overcome the barriers to youth participatory research of perceived incompetence and lack of understanding (Kellett et al. 2005, 2011). Alice's facilitation enabled the student researchers to make collective decisions, ensure the young people recognized the value of their input, equip them with the skills and tools to do research, and importantly take courage in difficult decisions. Such a role is key, in a school where there are expectations for teachers to align to the national will narratives which can impede the democratic processes we are trying to achieve.

After processing and analysing the data, the student researchers held an initial meeting with Mrs Atkinson about the results of the survey. The young people raised significant findings from their survey, with the intention to discuss possible actions going forward. Within this meeting, discussion centred around the lack of school toilet policy, and how the next appropriate step would be to create one. The students felt this might be a positive outcome of the project. However, initial optimism turned to disappointment when the onus was placed back onto the student researchers, as Mrs Atkinson requested them to design a new toilet policy on their own rather than working with them to co-construct it. As Elliot (Focus group) said, 'It's kind of "not my problem" – we had to do it'. This is indicative of the problem of complaint raised by Ahmed (2021), in which the problem is given back to the complainant. The complainant disrupts the narrative but those with more power resume normal practice by refusing to work for change and offer a supposed opportunity to the complainant. As Ahmed (2021, 33) writes 'more effort is required by those who make complaints'.

Gradual change?

The group produced a poster, based on the school survey results, and decided to place them on the walls of the sixth-form toilets. They were disappointed to find some of them taken down and stuck on the ceiling of the toilets adding to the frustration of not being able to afford change as we had all hoped. It is, however, a possible example of the frustration teachers might have when trying to improve things. However, the young researchers did not give up and continued to reflect upon these complexities, the process of engaging as students as researchers and upon the impact of the project. Whilst they did not achieve changing toilet policy and practice in the way they had hoped, they were positive about the experience. Josh described the initial changes they had witnessed at Enterprise Academy, yet referred to the issue that they felt still underpinned the toilet problems, 'they've started cleaning the toilets more. So, it's like cleaned everyday now, but it's still the same problem of social space. So, they're still sitting on the floor, people still vaping' (Focus group).

However, of greater interest and importance are the reflections on the impact of the project on themselves as researchers, and how such projects might work. When discussing how to work with young people they strongly argued that respect, value and inclusion were crucial to developing trusting research relationships. They raised learning points

around how even though they felt listened to within the research sessions, elevating their student voice within school was a more difficult task:

> I think there's a difference between being heard and then actively doing something about, like school have listened, whether they've actually then done anything is different … if you kind of listen to someone the assumption is that you take it in, you know you're focusing on what they are saying, and if you're hearing them and then you kind of like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah' And then you just kind of move on because they seem to have kind of done something but also just not really. (Elliot, Focus group)

The constraints of practical school issues

A significant practical issue was adapting our sessions to fit with the school setting. Alice facilitated the sessions to only last 25 minutes long, to be within the form time. Whilst longer conversations would have been appreciated, 'I think it worked but it … you'd get into the flow of it, but then it'd be immediately cut off because the 20-minute marker, so take you about 10 minutes to get into it. And then 10 minutes later, it's done' (Josh, Focus group), it was a pragmatic workaround during a busy school week. 'It would have been nice to have a bit longer time, but it wasn't a deal breaker, I don't think' (Elliot Focus group).

English state schools are subject to a neoliberal regime with many constraints and expectations. The heavy focus on exams and ensuing data has narrowed the curriculum, edging out of time for critical thinking, creativity and democratic citizenship (Neumann et al. 2020). The issues presented by the school demonstrate the tension between wanting to do something such as Toilet Talk, and the reality of meeting neoliberal expectations, and accountability measures. It is questionable whether it is possible to run a fully participatory project, when the school itself must be seen as a willing subject of the neoliberal national will (Ahmed 2014). Teachers seemingly impeding the democratic process were doing what is expected of them. They were willing subjects. Whilst we as researchers considered the impact on children and young people being seen as willful subjects, we had not considered the realities faced by staff at schools.

Similarly, the student researchers were also openly working within the neoliberal meritocratic system. When asked about their motivations, they were open about the benefits to their university applications. Whilst praising the opportunity to have a voice and take action, there was a transactional nature to their involvement, 'I'd say I think the main reason I did it was to have kind of stuff, under your belt to be able to talk about when you got for jobs or apply for stuff' (Oscar, Focus group).

However, the remaining three researchers, Elliot, Oscar and Joshua, could see the value in developing further research skills and continued to work with Alice. They co-wrote a blog about their motivations for getting involved, some of the steps the research team went through and the hopes for the outcomes of the project (Little et al. 2022) and later presented to a university conference about their work. Elliot, Oscar and Joshua continued to work on this article and another, with Alice, about their experiences (Green et al. 2023).

Conclusion

Some might consider the project a failure; we did not effectively co-construct ethical toilet policy and practice apart from secure some extra cleaning. Yet, the student researchers

came away positive and not just because they had added to their CV. They had demonstrated high-level critical reflection and ethical thinking. They had tried to affect change and managed to have some conversations with staff. They demonstrated an ability to question and speak to power and asserting some form of democratic right. Complaint is hard. As Ahmed (2021) argues complaint involves identifying blockages and unblocking them, and the stamina to do so. In this case, some blockages were more visible than others, posters down toilets and school systems undermining the young people's expectations, yet they continued. As Ahmed (2021) argues, the point of feminist pedagogy isn't to necessarily win but to understand more about the injustices around us and the Toilet Talk project did achieve that. All involved gained a stronger understanding of how the wider system impedes some bodies more than others, as well as the difficulties involved in navigating institutional policy and practice.

Questions were raised within the school but also the study has created an imperative for wider engagement with schools. A key limitation of the study is the lack of teacher voice, which some of the team will address in our next project with a nationwide teacher survey which we suspect may help build positive relationships between students and staff. We feel confident with our learning, that not only must we continue to talk and research toilets, but we must extend the project to younger age groups. We are confident that we can, and must, challenge the perceptions of ethics committees when it comes to young people. As is common in Youth Participatory Research (e.g. Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2023; Cahill et al. 2019; Dobson 2023; Malik 2022), the student researchers have challenged the assumption that young people are not competent or capable to research a complex topic. They have taught us to think more about building relationships with schools and other adults, to enable us to improve the next project which we hope will be with younger researchers. Challenging thinking around ethics and young researchers, weakens the barriers to democratic research: 'impact is a slow inheritance' (Ahmed 2021, 310).

Children, young people and adults all need to use the toilet regularly, some more than others. Our current school system effectively discourages toilet use, as the student survey demonstrated, through disciplinary and civilizing processes (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2019). As Barcan (2010) argues, humans have been conditioned to be disgusted by urine, faeces and blood, and by association public toilets are a site of disgust, shame and embarrassment, before the material conditions are considered. The further levels of disgust, shame and embarrassment experienced by children and young people, especially those who are disabled, transgender, gender diverse or girls, is deeply problematic. Not only are such issues emblematic of a problematic school system (Bagley 2023) but also point to wider issues of social justice 'the distribution, quality and structure of public toilets are both symbols and concrete representations of a larger system of social hierarchies' (Plaskow 2008, 52). It is thus essential to address these problems but importantly they need to be addressed by working with children and young people to ensure there is the fullest understanding about what needs to change.

Note

1. Sixth form is the post-16 provision in schools in the UK.

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Elliot Dobson was a student researcher on the project and will study at York University after a year of travelling.

Oscar Glover was a student researcher on the project and is studying at Leeds University.

Joshua Patterson was a student researcher on the project and is studying at Sheffield Hallam.

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