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# 'I want to make the biggest difference':

A case study of project-based learning through the NextGenLeaders programme.

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## Introduction

The inclusion of children and young people as researchers is becoming increasingly popular within school-based research projects (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Allen, 2008). The United Nations (UN) Convention for the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) served as a catalyst towards understanding children and young people as active subjects, rather than passive recipients, in the research process (Gillies and Robinson, 2012). In particular, Article 12 stated that every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, with emphasis on being taken seriously. This attitudinal shift has contributed to increased advocacy and implementation of participatory methodologies with young people (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017).

Sympathetic of democratic and participatory methodologies, this report represents a collaborative research project conducted by 12 young people and a postgraduate researcher who sought to explore secondary school pupils' experiences of the NextGenLeaders programme and perceptions of project-based learning (PBL). This report aims to build upon a systematic review conducted by Dobson (2023), a member of the research team, which demonstrated how, paradoxically, research into participatory methodologies often use researcher-led rather than democratic and participatory methodologies.

Through a collaborative research approach, the young people explore and reflect on their own experience of engaging in PBL and collaborative inquiry. Adopting a case study design, we aim to explore the following lines of enquiry:

1. Young people's perceptions on the benefits and value of engaging in collaborative inquiry and PBL.
2. Young people's understandings of research ethics processes and their thoughts on ethical research practices.
3. Young people's experiences of PBL and collaborative inquiry through the NextGenLeaders programme.

The first section of this report will introduce Enactus UK and the NextGenLeaders programme, paying specific attention to the organisation's work with children and young people through PBL. The second section of this report frames the case study and overviews the research methods and ethical considerations central to this research. The latter sections of the report are dedicated to presenting data developed during the research process, in which young people's narratives, perceptions, and reflections are the central points of discussion.

## Enactus UK and NextGenLeaders

Enactus UK is a non-profit organisation whose work supports young people and higher education students across the UK to engage in social action and social enterprise. Driven by a desire to achieve the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), see figure 1, Enactus UK strive to enable young people to consider how we may work towards ending poverty, fighting inequality, and tackling climate change.

Figure 1: UN SDGs



(United Nations, 2023).

As part of Enactus UK's commitment to promoting social justice, in 2017 the organisation launched the NextGenLeaders programme. The NextGenLeaders programme seeks to empower young people (ages 11-18 years) to become the next generation of socially responsible leaders. The programme is delivered to disadvantaged young people across social mobility cold spots in the UK (NextGenLeaders, 2023). Through participation in the programme, young people become changemakers, engaging in PBL and collaborative enquiry; planning, conducting, and delivering bespoke research projects aiming to positively impact their local communities. Since its inauguration, the NextGenLeaders programme has grown year-on-year, with over 300 young people enrolled for the 2023/24 academic year.



### Vision

To create a society where young people feel empowered through project-based learning and youth participatory action. Where SDG education is a compulsory part of the National curriculum enabling all young people to gain the skills and knowledge they need to tackle the impending climate crisis.

### Mission

To implement a student-led and free-to-access programme into schools across social mobility cold spots engaging learners as young as Year 7. Encouraging young people to develop curiosity, creativity and empathy while challenging the status quo and developing sustainable, community-facing projects which create positive change to livelihoods.

(NextGenLeaders, 2023).

As the NextGenLeaders programme is targeted to the local communities of the young people who are engaged in the project. All NextGenLeaders research projects are individually bespoke, offering pupils the opportunity to work in collaboration with their peers, a NextGenLeaders facilitator, and key stakeholders from the local community to drive social change. Participation in the programme aims to develop young people's critical thinking skills, as documented in the Organisation for Economic Development's (OECD) memorandum: young people 'imagine and inquire', developing a research project by considering the beneficiaries and barriers of those involved (OECD, 2020). Informed by the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2021), participation in the NextGenLeaders programme enables young people to develop agency, as well as the skills and competencies required to become independent learners and actively transform society. Furthermore, the programme aims to support young people's re-engagement in their education by developing soft skills aligned with Gatsby benchmarks (British Association for Supported Employment, 2018). The programme encourages social change through PBL, whilst also sympathetic of youth participatory action research (YPAR) approaches to learning.

PBL is understood as an active student-centred form of education which is characterised by young people's collaboration, communication, investigation, and reflection (Kokotsaki, Menzies and Wiggins, 2016). Condliffe *et al's.* (2017) systematic review defines PBL as: projects that promote learning; students deciding the projects driving questions; student engagement being cultivated; and student projects which are presented to public audiences. Anyon *et al's.* (2018) review explores YPAR, outlining the approach as: projects that are grounded in youths' lived

experiences; youth are collaborators in methodologies and pedagogies; and youth are actively engaged in interventions to change practices to improve the lives of their communities. Comparing the two approaches, YPAR has more of an explicit focus on building students' capacity to undertake research to drive forward their projects and affect social change.

The inclusion of socially disadvantaged young people in YPAR and PBL projects has been shown to increase engagement, attendance and attainment in school (Chen and Yang, 2019), encourage continued engagement in education post-16 (Condliffe *et al.*, 2017), and provide young people with the competencies and affective skills outlined in the OECD's Learning Compass 2030, which include: cognitive competencies, such as critical thinking and problem solving; intrapersonal competencies, such as self-regulated learning; interpersonal competencies, including collaborative learning; and affective skills, such as motivation (Dobson, 2023). Despite these reported benefits, PBL and YPAR remain largely neglected pedagogical approach within mainstream UK education (Dobson, 2022).

This report documents the experiences of 12 changemakers currently enrolled on two bespoke NextGenLeaders programmes. The first project is called 'The Butterfly Effect', in which eight changemakers are aiming to increase awareness of the struggles that many young refugees face in British society. The second project, BADD Habits, involves four changemakers aiming to increase primary school pupils' awareness of the dangers of engaging in anti-social behaviour. Both projects follow a PBL and YPAR approach, with students using and developing their research skills to drive their own community-facing projects in order to tackle societal issues considered important by the changemakers.

## The Case Study

### Calder Grange High School

The young people as researchers project that this report focuses on was conducted with 12 pupils from one comprehensive secondary school in the North of England, pseudonymised as Calder Grange High School. Calder Grange is a mixed-gender secondary school with a pupil population of over 1500 young people aged 11-16 years. Located in an area of social deprivation, 39% of the pupils at Calder Grange are eligible for pupil premium funds - the UK national average for pupils eligible for free school meals is 19.7% (GOV.UK, 2023). The school is ethnically diverse with approximately 95% of the pupils identifying as Black or Minority Ethnic (BME), whilst the national average for the UK population is 18% (GOV.UK, 2023).

### Project Information

The original intention for the young people as researchers project had been to conduct seven research workshops which would run alongside the NextGenLeaders programme at Calder Grange High school. However, a series of school closures during the 2022/23 spring and summer terms (Department for Education, 2023), due to country-wide strike action, meant that only three research sessions were conducted. Table 1 provides contextual information about the three research sessions.



**Table 1: Research session information**

	Attendees	Session Aims	Related Activities	Data Collected
<b>Session: 1</b> <b>Date:</b> 25.05.2023 <b>Duration:</b> 40minutes <b>Location:</b> Classroom	Matthew, 11 x changemakers	<a href="#">Introductions from the young people and ice-breaker activity.</a> <a href="#">Introduction to the project from Matthew.</a> <a href="#">Focus group discussion about young people's perceptions of research.</a>	Mind-mapping exercise: young people to describe themselves in a few words. Provision of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent form to all the pupils. Discussion of the ethics forms. Focus group discussion with the young people and Matthew.	Mind-map of changemakers self-descriptions. (Not presented in this report due to ensure anonymity). Focus group audio recording.
<b>Session: 2</b> <b>Date:</b> 05.06.2023 <b>Duration:</b> 40minutes <b>Location:</b> Classroom (computer room)	Matthew, NGL facilitator, Schoolteacher, 12 x changemakers	Revisit research ethics and discuss changemakers reflections of the ethical consent processes. Changemakers to discuss what 'research' means to them. Planning for the next session.	Whole group discussion (unrecorded) about the research ethics documentation and changemakers providing their consent for this session. Mind-mapping activity, with changemakers discussing what 'research' means to them. Unstructured discussions. Changemaker reflections of the first two sessions in their research logs.	Mind-maps related to the following themes: Research ethics; what is research?; and research 'rules'. Changemaker journal entries.
<b>Session: 3</b> <b>Date:</b> 18.07.2023 <b>Duration:</b> 75minutes <b>Location:</b> Classroom (art-studio)	Matthew, NGL facilitator, Schoolteacher, 11 x changemakers	To discuss how the changemakers may conduct research for the NextGenLeaders projects. To discuss the benefits of project-based learning for young people. Planning for future sessions.	Whole group discussion (unrecord) about their NextGenLeaders projects and the changemakers plans for their respective projects. Mind-mapping exercise focusing on the changemakers own research plans. Mind-mapping activity focusing on the benefits of project-based learning.	Mind-maps related to the following themes: benefits of project-based learning; research methods; and ethical considerations. Changemaker journal entries.

## Research Methods

The original intention of this research project was to follow a YPAR design - ideally the changemakers would have worked collaboratively to design a project to collect, analyse and disseminate data about their experiences of running their own projects. However due to the scheduling constraints, the project instead followed a participatory qualitative design, enabling the changemakers to reflect on their own initial experiences of planning their projects. Conscious of the time-consuming nature of collaborative research (Fitzgerald, Stride and Enright, 2021), the research approach was adapted to consult the changemakers' ideas of what information they wanted to gain and how we might work collectively to undertake research. The research sessions ran simultaneously to the NextGenLeaders sessions, and therefore the methodological decisions made were largely decided in consultation with the NextGenLeaders facilitator, the project gatekeeper, and changemakers themselves.

### Sampling criteria and procedure

As this project was conducted in collaboration with Enactus and the NextGenLeaders programme, a criterion-based sampling strategy was adopted to identify potential co-researchers. The criteria for pupils to become a co-researcher on this project were two-fold: (a) all participants must be currently, or have previously been, enrolled on a NextGenLeaders programme; (b) all participants must attend Calder Grange High School. It was also desirable, but not essential, that the participants would be recruited from school year 8 (ages 12-13) at the request of Enactus. In total, 12 young people were recruited to be participants for this project, which also represented the sum of young people engaged in the NextGenLeaders programme running at Calder Grange. The participants are referred to throughout this report as 'changemakers', a term utilised throughout the NextGenLeaders programme. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report as it was agreed by all the co-researchers and the schoolteacher that all changemakers would remain anonymous within this report. Table 2 displays the participant information.

**Table 2: Participant information**

Participant Name	Gender	School Year	Project Team
Changemaker 1	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 2	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 3	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 4	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 5	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 6	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 7	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 8	Female	Year 8	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 9	Male	Year 8	BADD Habits
Changemaker 10	Male	Year 8	BADD Habits
Changemaker 11	Male	Year 8	BADD Habits
Changemaker 12	Male	Year 8	BADD Habits



### Ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of the collaborative research, informed consent was sought from all changemakers, the schoolteacher who organised the research sessions and who acted as the gatekeeper, and the NextGenLeaders facilitator. Before seeking consent, it was important to make all changemakers aware of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the project at any time, without consequence or penalty. It was also important to emphasise that should any of the young people not wished to participate, or decided to later withdraw, that their participation in the NextGenLeaders project would not be impacted.

All the changemakers provided written informed consent from the outset of the project, and process consent procedures were followed throughout the project. This involved changemakers providing their written consent at the start of each research workshop after being informed of the session aims. Advocated by Valentine (1999) and Harcourt and Conroy (2011), the process consent procedure ensured that the changemakers were willing to participate at all stages of the project. Throughout the research process, careful consideration was paid to ensuring that no changemakers felt pressured to participate (Flewitt, 2005) - on two occasions, a changemaker decided to opt out of conversations, instead continuing with their NextGenLeaders project.

### Research methods

Whilst the original intention of the project was to follow a YPAR methodology in which the changemakers would develop their own research methods to inform this report, the cancellation of research workshops restricted this approach. Therefore, whilst operating under the ethos of YPAR, the changemakers collaborated with the university researcher to make decisions about the use of research methods to help explore and capture their experiences of planning their bespoke projects. Subsequently, data was collected through a combination of conversation-based methods and written journal entries. The combination of multiple research methods enabled the project to be considered a case study.

#### Focus group

During the first research session, Matthew, university researcher, facilitated an open-ended focus group discussion in which 11 of the 12 changemakers participated. The broader aim of the focus group was to allow the changemakers to discuss why they enrolled in the NextGenLeaders programme, what they wished to gain from their participation, and any challenges that they anticipated to encounter. The focus group allowed the changemakers to collectively discuss their opinions, aspirations, and perceptions (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010) of PBL at the outset of their research journeys. Sympathetic of participatory values, the focus group was designed to be a 'knowledge-production process' (Bergold and Thomas, 2012, p.2) in which the changemakers would initiate discussion and engage in shared reflection. Subsequently, the focus group proved a useful method in exploring young people's thoughts in a collaborative manner.

Before the focus group commenced, careful consideration was paid to the space in which the discussion would develop and the relationship between the adult researcher and the changemakers. Attempting to create a more informal atmosphere than that created in a 'normal' classroom setting, furniture was rearranged so that all participants could sit together and maintain eye-contact with every speaker. Young people may be more likely to engage in focus group conversations when they feel comfortable and relaxed (Gibson *et al.*, 2018), therefore icebreakers were used. All participants were asked if they wanted to provide an interesting fact about themselves. The focus group lasted approximately 20 minutes, shortened due to the time constraints of the school schedule, and was audio recorded using a Dictaphone. changemaker quotes are presented verbatim later in this report.

On reflection, the methodological decision to conduct one large focus group with all the changemakers may have been flawed. Noted by Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2007), group dynamics may restrict the space for expression, with shyness preventing some participants from speaking openly during focus groups. Indeed, several of the changemakers were reserved during the focus group, only contributing during the icebreaker activity. On reflection, it may have been better suited to conduct separate focus group discussions with the two research teams. However, due to the lone working of the researcher during the first research session, this was considered to not be a viable option.

#### Mind mapping

The primary method of data collection utilised during the second and third research workshops was mind mapping. During the second research session, the university researcher invited the changemakers to discuss broad topics of 'research methods', 'research ethics', and 'project-based learning'. In the third session, the changemakers decided what topics they wanted to discuss, which included 'voice of the youth' and 'our research methods'. This approach enabled the two research groups to discuss, explore, and record their thoughts towards various aspects of research (Davies, 2011). Guided by the recommendations of Buzan and Buzan (2000), the changemakers were provided with A3 paper, coloured pens, and protected time to discuss their thoughts and perceptions on the following topics: focus groups, project-based learning, research ethics, and research 'rules'. A selection of the mind maps developed during the research sessions are presented later in the report.



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### Research journals

The final method of data collection utilised during this project was journaling. From the outset of the project, all changemakers were provided with their own bespoke research journal in which they could record their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the research process (see Appendix A for journal template). Journal entries were conducted both individually and/or collectively, dependent on the changemakers preference (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). The decision to use research journals was guided by NextGenLeaders use of changemaker logbooks and was determined by the university researcher, rather than the changemakers. However, it was stressed that the changemakers could record as little or as much information as they desired.

### Researcher reflexivity

To make visible and confront his own assumptions, Matthew kept a research diary and met regularly with his university supervisors Tom and Charlotte, and the NextGenLeaders facilitator who offered shared reflection on the project's progress and the challenges encountered. A particular area of focus was the positionality of the lead researcher, Matthew, during the research workshops and specifically how he attempted to distance himself from a persona aligned with that of a teacher. Motivated by an aspiration to foreground changemakers' agency throughout the project and attempting to minimise his power advantage as an adult (Atkinson, 2019), Matthew approached the sessions in an adapted positionality of the 'least adult'. Attempting to distance himself from a more authoritarian teacher persona, Matthew regularly reminded the changemakers that he was in fact not a teacher, but rather a researcher interested in the same issues as the changemakers themselves. Moreover, Matthew was cautious not to enact teacher-like behaviours, often allowing unstructured conversations to develop, even when they were not related to the research project. Consideration was also paid to whether the research could be labelled as 'participatory', reflecting on Holland and colleagues' (2010) warning that young people's participation does not make research participatory. This was achieved in this project as the changemakers had the opportunities to be involved in the project decision-making and in reflection on the research process.

### Data analysis

The focus group conducted in the first research workshop gave the changemakers the opportunity to share their initial thoughts about research, project-based learning, and the NextGenLeaders programme. These key discussion points were then triangulated with mind-mapping exercises and journal entries made during the second and third research sessions, allowing the data to be abductively thematically coded by synthesising the data with literature relating to YPAR and PBL. Whilst it was our intention to invite the changemakers to contribute to the analysis process, the disrupted nature of the research sessions and the timing of the research project meant that this was not possible, therefore Matthew completed the thematic analysis. In line with Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), the approach to data analysis involved three stages: immersion in the data; coding the data; and establishing patterns in the data to identify themes. The three key themes coded across the data set were: The benefits and value of project-based learning; the challenges of collaborative enquiry; and young people's approaches to research during the NextGenLeaders programme. These themes are presented and discussed below, drawing heavily upon the generated data to place the changemakers' contributions at the centre of discussion.





## Results and Discussion

### Theme 1: Young people's perceptions on the benefits and value of engaging in collaborative enquiry and project-based learning.

Throughout the three research workshops attention was paid to exploring why young people enrolled on the NextGenLeaders programme and wished to engage in PBL more broadly. A prominent theme which emerged from all three forms of data was that the changemakers wished to make a positive impact on their local community, an underpinning goal of the NextGenLeaders programme and broader YPAR and PBL pedagogies. This desire was evidenced during the focus group discussion, in which several of the changemakers expressed their motivation for enrolling in the project:

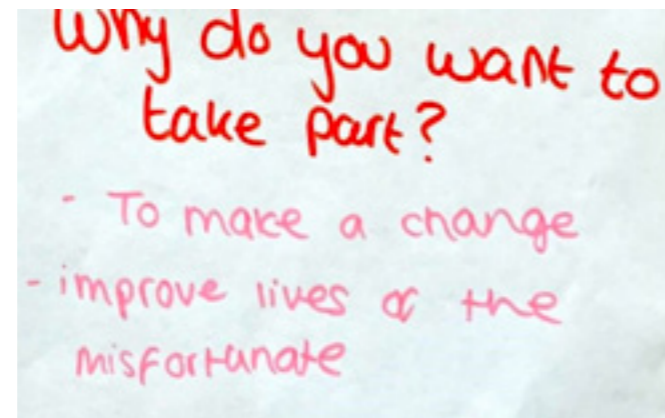
**Changemaker 1:** I want to make the biggest impact on our local community. I think that it's important to the city's [anonymised] reputation to be improved.

**Changemaker 5:** I want to change the world and have an impact.

**Changemaker 3:** We get the opportunities to listen, so we can improve the lives of the next generation. So, we can make a brighter future for the next children, to make the world a better place.

These quotes evidence changemakers' commitments to taking responsibility to improve their local communities. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2022) cites 'taking responsibility' as a key transformative competency for young people, which will enable a range of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive benefits. The Changemakers' motivations to promote social change in their local communities was also discussed during the second research workshop through critical conversation and mind mapping. Figure 2 displays the mind-mapping activity which the Butterfly Effect team formed during the section research workshop.

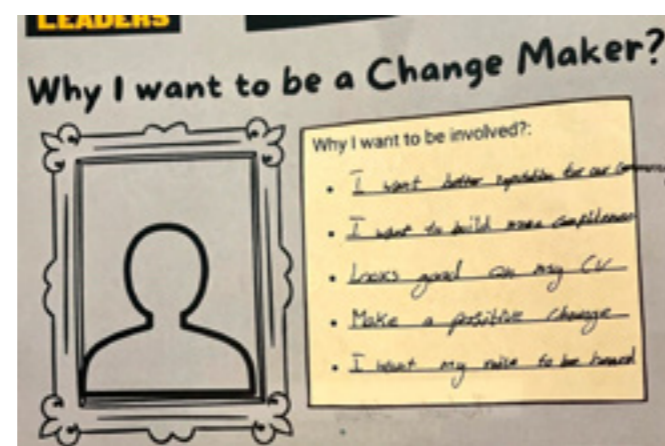
**Figure 2: Why do you want to take part?**



(The Butterfly Effect, Session 2).

Furthermore, the importance of improving the lives of the local community was also captured within the reflexive journal entries of several of the changemakers. Figure 3 displays the journal entry made by changemaker 9 at the end of the first research workshop.

**Figure 3: Why I want to be a changemaker?**



The changemaker quotes and the thoughts demonstrated in figures 2 and 3 have illuminated a shared motivation amongst the changemakers regarding their involvement in the NextGenLeaders programme, primarily associated with a desire to improve their local communities. In addition to a shared desire to positively influence their local communities and the lives of future generations, the changemakers also reflect on the more individualised reasons for their enrolment in the collaborative research project. For many of the young people enrolled in the NextGenLeaders programme the process provided them with an opportunity to learn in a different format than that of their secondary school education:

**Changemaker 7:** I want to do something different.

**Changemaker 3:** Because we will be wanting to do and explore different things. Whereas in lessons you have to research a certain subject in a certain way.

Similar perceptions were also documented by the BADD habits research team during a mind-mapping exercise, see Figure 4. The boys noted how they perceived PBL to be more engaging than normal school education (Condliffe *et al.*, 2017), which they also considered to be a more effective method than teacher-led lessons. The participatory and collaborative nature of the PBL approach is therefore understood to provide young people with increased agency that they may not otherwise experience through normalised schooling practices (Bland and Atweh, 2007). Furthermore, PBL is understood to enable young people to become independent thinkers and learners (Bell, 2010), in which they can solve real-world issues, which aligns with the OECD's Learning Compass 2030.

**Figure 4: Perceived benefits of project-based learning**



(BADD Habits, Session 3).

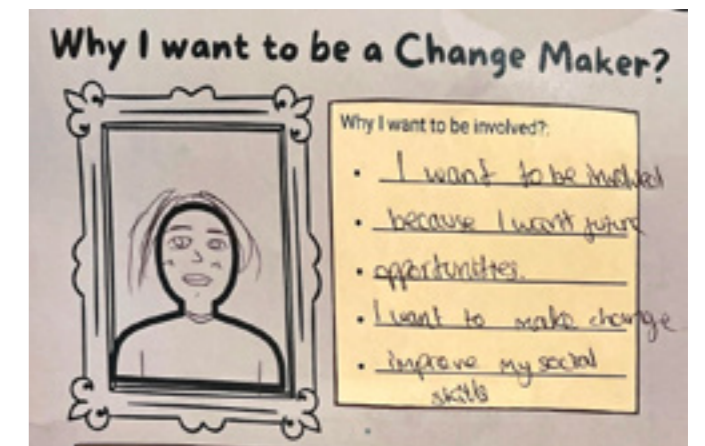
The collaborative and democratic nature of the NextGenLeaders programme was further perceived by the changemakers as a reason for their enrolment. Reflecting on Dobson's (2023) review, the changemakers identified the benefits of PBL to include interpersonal competences and social skills, such as teamwork and communication, as well as affective skills of increased self-confidence. Again, these perceptions were captured throughout the current research project, first discovered during the focus group discussion:

**Changemaker 11:** I want to improve my confidence.

**Changemaker 8:** I want to develop my communication and teamwork skills.

Whilst perhaps wary of disclosing aspirations to improve social skills and self-confidence during the focus group discussions, the changemakers' reflexive journal entries documented these ambitions, as displayed in figures 5 and 6.

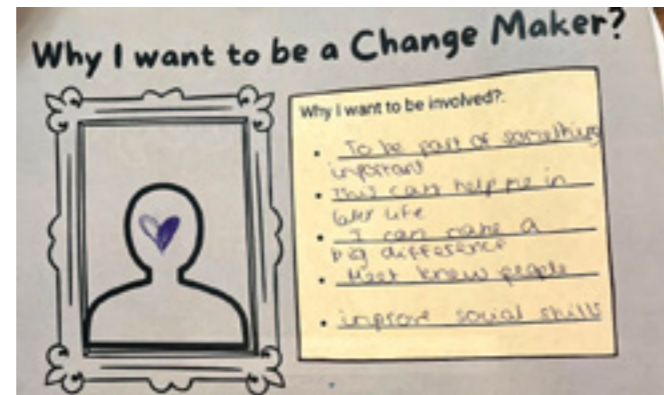
**Figure 5: Why I want to be a Changemaker?**



(Changemaker 6).



Figure 6: Why I want to be a Changemaker?



(Changemaker 9).

When combined, the changemakers' quotes and journal entries evidence how young people appreciate that participation in the NextGenLeaders programme may enable them to develop interpersonal competencies, including social skills and communication, as well as affective skills, such as confidence and engagement (Dobson, 2023). The benefits of young people engaging in PBL are well documented, with the process understood to enable young people to improve communication, collaboration, and negotiation skills (Bell, 2010; Condliffe *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, Kellett (2010) suggests that participatory approaches may promote young researcher personal development. Other reported benefits of young people engaging in participatory research include personal pride, increased understanding of research, and a sense of being valued (Moules and O'Brien, 2016), all of which were recorded by the changemakers as motivations for engagement in the NextGenLeaders project.

In summary, the changemakers' perceptions and reflections have revealed that there is no one all-encompassing reason as to why young people wish to engage in the NextGenLeaders programme, or in PBL more broadly. Instead, their motivations are multi-faceted and bespoke to the individual involved. When young people help shape the research agenda, their focus drives the enquiry rather than relying solely on adult perspectives (O'Brien and Moules, 2007). The reflections provided in this section underline the requirement to discuss why young people wish to be involved in research in order to best facilitate shared learning and development.

## Theme 2: Ethical considerations and perceived challenges in collaborative enquiry with young people

Research ethics procedures and the process of gaining informed consent are at the forefront of many debates when conducting research with children and young people (Flewitt, 2005; Whittington, 2019; Valentine, 1999). Debates include how to negotiate access with gatekeepers (Flewitt, 2005), the processual nature of consent (Flewitt, 2005; Valentine, 1990), and ethical governance processes around sensitive topics and risk (Whittington, 2019). Mindful that this process often involves adult researchers informing child participants, Matthew sought to involve the changemakers as active agents by inviting them to critically reflect and discuss their thoughts and perceptions of the ethics process implemented during the first research session. While all the changemakers agreed to voluntarily participate in the current project, the following collaborative mind-maps display some of the young people's perceptions of the university ethics forms and ethical approval process (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Changemakers' ethics form mind-map



(BADD Habits and The Butterfly Effect, Session 2).

Figure 7 represents the changemakers' initial perceptions and thoughts about the ethical approval process undertaken during the first research session. Whilst many of the young people perceived the ethics form to be relatively straight forward, easy to understand, and well structured (specifically related to the tick box-oriented consent form), some of the changemakers were particularly interested in the confidential nature of their participation. Two contributions stand out: (a) Matthew Green is not allowed to share anything and, (b) good as we can go to this session and our contribution will be confidential. Some of the changemakers stressed the importance of the confidential nature of their participation due to the perceived freedom this provided them, potentially alleviating any fears of 'saying the wrong thing' and building trust across the research relationship (Smith, Davis and Bhowmik, 2010).

Although the research ethics process was considered to be 'easy' and 'straightforward' by the changemakers, this may be problematic. University research ethics committees often advise that documents need to be simplified in order for the potential participants, in this case children and young people, to access and understand the project information (Taplin *et al.*, 2022). However, this is sometimes an over-simplified approach that may give children and young people misconceptions about ethics and detract from the importance of the information denoted on participant information sheets and consent forms.

The changemakers stressed the importance of confidentiality during the research workshops when they were discussing their ways of working agreement, documented in Figure 8.



**Figure 8: OUR Research “Rules”**

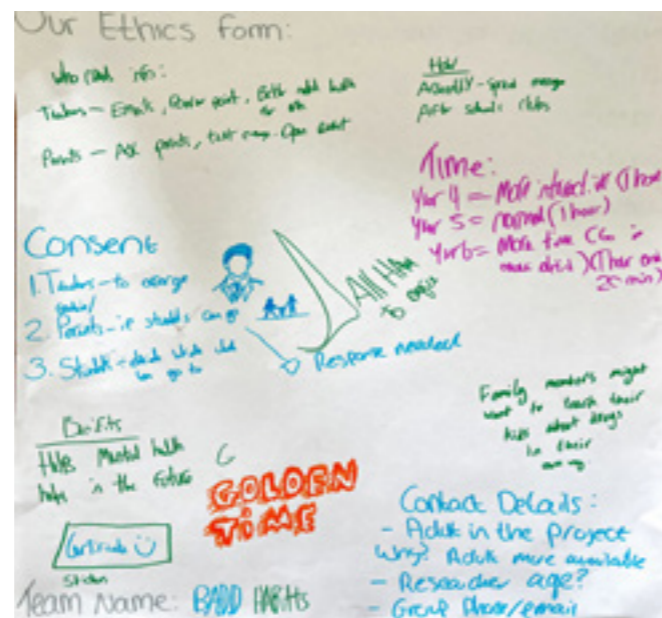


(BADD Habits and The Butterfly Effect, Session 2).

The mind-map documents a combination of personal values and ethical considerations that the changemakers considered to be important to the research workshops. Discussions centred upon confidentiality and relational considerations of being respectful, allowing contributions from all, and maintaining focus on the topic. Working in a manner which allowed all changemakers to take turns to contribute was stressed as an important ‘rule’ by the majority of the changemakers.

During the third, and final, research session, the changemakers considered what research ethics processes they would have to consider when they began collecting data for their NextGenLeaders research projects. After revisiting the university ethics form, which all the changemakers read and signed during the first research session, the BADD research group discussed and documented what they considered to be important ethical considerations for their research project, which aimed to educate primary school pupils’ (ages 5-11) about the dangers of anti-social behaviour and drug use. Figure 9 represents the concept-map that the BADD research group created when discussing their own ethical considerations.

**Figure 9: Changemaker research ethics form**



(BADD Habits, Session 3).

The BADD Habits research team presented their ethics form mind-map to both the Butterfly Effect research team and Matthew. They emphasised the importance of gaining informed consent from teachers, parents, and pupils, citing that consent should first be sought from the adults (teachers and parents), before asking for consent from their target sample, primary school pupils. The boys explained that active consent was required from all three groups. The research group also considered how they would provide teachers, parents, and pupils with the necessary information required to make an informed decision regarding their participation, explaining that a school assembly may be the most appropriate method of recruiting the pupils. Finally, the group explored how they would provide the participants with the necessary contact information should they have any questions about the project. The boys reflected on the importance of having an adult as the direct contact for participants, namely the NextGenLeaders facilitator, as they may be more readily available to respond and due to their ages, under 16 years. The boys further proposed that they could create a research group email address or phone number which could be used by all group members to respond to any queries - this would mitigate the young researchers sharing their own contact information.

The point raised by the BADD Habits research team regarding their age being an important consideration during the research ethics process was also cited as a perceived barrier to young people engaging in research during the focus group discussion. When asked if they had uncertainties about conducting their own research projects, several of the changemakers indicated the age of the researcher may be a barrier:

- Changemaker 1:** Age, depending on how mature you are and how developed you are as well.
- Changemaker 2:** Depending on age, people might not want to give us information for what we want because we have no idea.

The significance of the changemakers age, primarily due to being under 16 years old, was further problematised by the Butterfly Effect group when they collectively discussed the role of youth voice in their project (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Voice of the youth**



(The Butterfly Effect, Session 3)

Whilst the young people in the Butterfly Effect team believed that children and young people should be given equal rights and equal opportunities to have their voices heard and actioned, they also said that school pupils often do not have equal rights in comparison to those deemed superior, e.g., teachers. Indeed, in an educational climate of ‘high-stakes accountability’ (Earley, 2016, p.26), emphasis on examination results often marginalises the opportunity for students to express their views (Smyth and McInerney, 2012). Here, the changemakers indicated that if young

people are given the opportunity to voice their opinions, they would be able to raise awareness of the localised issues and make a difference to the local community, a key aim of the NextGenLeaders programme.

This section has explored and documented the changemakers’ perceptions of the research ethics process and demonstrated how young people are able to critically reflect on ethics processes through their own research projects. Confidentiality was discovered to be a key ethical consideration for young people engaging in collaborative inquiry within an education-based setting. Furthermore, in just three short research workshops, the young researchers were able to begin forming their own ethical consent documents, understanding the complexities of gaining informed consent when conducting school-based research. Focusing more closely on the BADD Habits research teams’ ethics form, the structure mirrors the consent form they were provided in session one, which they reported to be ‘easy’ to understand and navigate. Whilst the changemakers may have copied the structure of the ethics form, specifically the subheadings used, they also demonstrated a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of ethics processes. In this regard, the boys were able to differentiate between how and at what stage consent should be sought from teachers, parents, and pupils, as well as discussing the differing time requirements to outline their project to pupils of varying ages.

Furthermore, the changemakers problematised their age as a barrier to their own project-based research, indicating that they often feel their voice is not as valued as their adult teachers. While stressing the importance of equal rights and equal opportunities for young people, the Butterfly Effect team documented how they feel that students’ voices are not considered to be as important as those deemed superior, teachers and adults. These perceptions are perhaps not surprising when considering the literature which indicates that traditional teacher-pupil relationships have been characterised by a heightened power advantaged for teachers due to their positions of authority and responsibility in relation to pupils (Robinson and Taylor, 2013). Flutter (2007) states that through listening to students’ perspectives, teachers can gain new insights to make a difference to pupils’ learning, similarly we believe that by listening to the changemakers’ perceptions of the research process we may be able to promote more democratic research in the future.



### Theme 3: Changemakers' perceptions of research and planning a project.

The final theme to be discussed within this report is the changemakers' perceptions of research and thoughts on how they may wish to conduct research for their NextGenLeaders projects. At the very beginning of their NextGenLeaders journey, the changemakers were asked to share their perceptions of research: what is it? And how might they conduct their own research? Many of the changemakers alluded to two categories of research and quantitative research methods:

**Changemaker 12:** There is two types of research, primary and secondary. Primary is basically going out and doing, secondary is information from online mediums.

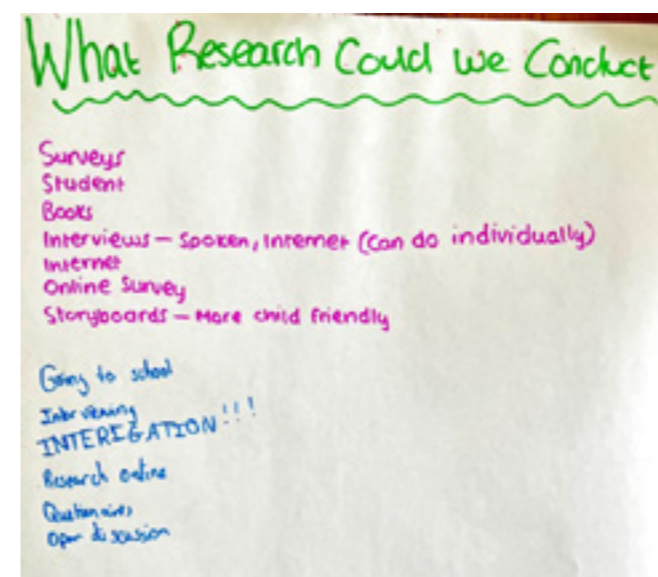
**Changemaker 1:** What it means is statistics, logos, scientists, these kind of things are primary. Secondary, some great stuff out there. But that's what research is. Creating surveys so you can collect information.

Often utilised during the NextGenLeaders programmes, surveys are also widely used in schools (Yeoman *et al.*, 2017). The changemakers' references to statistics denote the presentation of data, perhaps aligning to young people's experiences of mathematics and geography lessons (Yeoman *et al.*, 2017).

During the second session, the NextGenLeaders facilitator took part in a discussion with the changemakers about their bespoke research projects and encouraged them to consider how they may gain the information they require. Matthew suggested that it may be beneficial for the changemakers to revisit their reflexive journal logs in which each young researcher listed their perceived strengths during the first session. These journal entries were then used as a catalyst for discussion on what research the two groups would like to conduct.

Whilst the changemakers were discussing their potential data collection methods, the teams were asked to record all the ideas generated. These discussion points are recorded in figure 11:

Figure 11: What research could we conduct?



The discussions centred on how the two research groups may collect information for their own research projects, demonstrating that the changemakers had a broad knowledge of research methods and were able to consider which may be the most appropriate method(s) for their bespoke projects. In this regard, the Butterfly Effect team (contributions noted in purple) identified that they may wish to conduct a visual and creative methodology, that of storyboarding. The girls' discussed how storyboarding may be more child friendly and accessible as their target sample was child refugees. Similarly, the BADD Habits team (contributions noted in blue) discussed how group interviews may be the most appropriate method of data collection for them to engage with primary school pupils. The changemakers perceived group interviews to be the most appropriate method of data collection due to the method's ability to capture participants voices, which was a key aim of both research teams. Furthermore, discussions between the changemakers revealed that they perceived enabling their potential participants to speak openly about the issues they were researching would provide more useful information than that which may be gathered from a survey.

Whilst the current project concluded before the changemakers began to design and conduct their research projects, primarily due to the academic year concluding, the shared learnings gained through this project have encouraged the changemakers to consider research methods more aligned to their own strengths and expertise, which they had noted in their research journal during the first research workshop, see figures 12 and 13.

Figure 12: Changemaker 11's journal entry

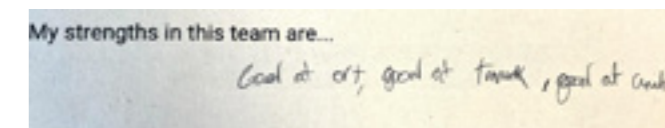
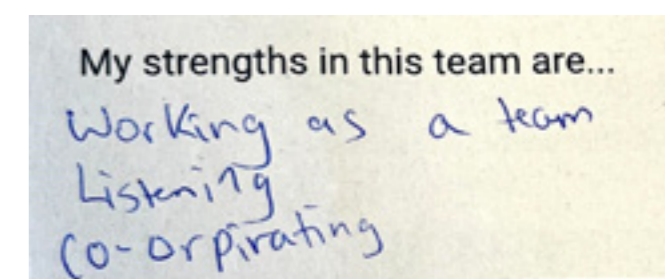


Figure 13: Changemaker 4's journal entry



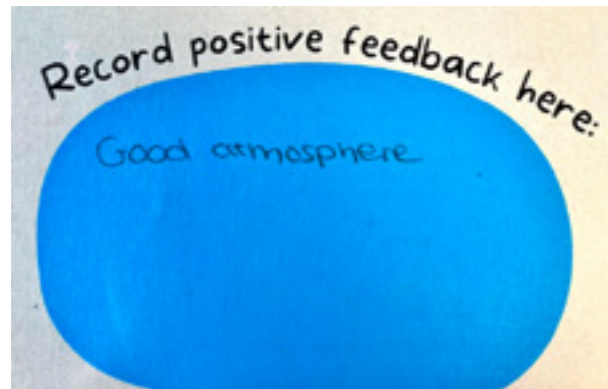
In accordance with the strengths displayed above, many of the changemakers documented that their biggest strengths are their abilities to work in a team, to communicate, with emphasis on listening, and creativity. Therefore, the changemakers were invited to consider research methods that may best utilise their bespoke skills sets, rather than following the precedent of survey-based research often utilised in the NextGenLeaders programme. Encouraging the changemakers to reflect on their own strengths enabled them to think more broadly about research methods and which methods they may feel more comfortable using for their own research projects. With the changemakers NextGenLeaders research projects are due to resume during October 2023 (the following academic year), it is hoped that the young researchers feel more equipped to make an informed decision on their research approaches considering such discussions and reflections.

The final sub-theme to be discussed is the changemakers' reflection on their involvement in this project and the parallel NextGenLeaders project. Before providing the young people's journal entries, it is important to acknowledge that these changemakers were at the very beginning of their projects at the time of journal entry

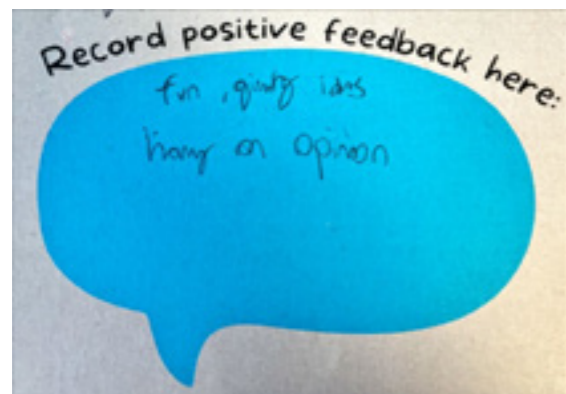


and only attended three research workshops, therefore the reflection period is limited. Nonetheless, during these three sessions the reflexive journal entries made by the changemakers revealed some commonalities in their perceptions of the research workshops, see figures 14 and 15.

**Figure 14: Changemaker 10's feedback**



**Figure 15: Changemaker 7's feedback**



Although not all the changemakers opted to record a journal entry, the entries from those that did reveal their enjoyment during the research workshops in part due to the positive atmosphere and the opportunity for them to voice their opinions. The collaborative nature research sessions created a culture in which the changemakers' 'right to freedom of expression' (UN, 1989) was enabled and valued; this was a particular strength of the three research workshops. These changemaker reflections are particularly pleasing when compared to the changemakers' assertions of why they enrolled in the NextGenLeaders programme provided during session one. Given the opportunity, it would be insightful to track the changemakers reflections across an extended period.





## Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has discussed the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of 12 young people enrolled in the NextGenLeaders programme. Utilising a democratic and participatory approach, the study has demonstrated that young people's motivations for engaging in participatory research and PBL are multi-faceted and that it is important for those facilitating collaborative inquiry to understand why young people wish to engage in PBL to best support them throughout the research process. The report has also explored young people's thoughts of research ethics processes and overviewed some of the key considerations that young people deemed to be of utmost importance when engaging in collaborative inquiry. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that young people should be active agents in the research process, demonstrating enjoyment, criticality, and creative thinking throughout this short research project.

The findings and related discussion above have demonstrated how the use of participatory methods with young people allow them to develop their own sophisticated understanding of both research ethics and methodology. This includes transforming how ethics is often presented to young people in a 'dumbed down' way through university assent protocols to thinking about issues to do with age and interpersonal relationships (Taplin *et al.*, 2022). It is also indicated in the way that the changemakers think about themselves and their participants when designing their own bespoke research projects in terms of appropriate methods of data collection. This demonstrates that 'capacity building' in relation to research methods has the potential to be truly participatory in nature rather than instructor led as is often the case in YPAR (Anderson, 2020). It also indicates that YPAR could be highly meaningful for young people when they also direct research at a meta-level in order to explore the nature of their participation in PBL. As indicated earlier, this rarely happens (Dobson, 2023) and this means there is a central contradiction into research in YPAR and PBL as the research itself is researcher-led. Undertaking research which encourages young people to be reflexive and reflective through the use of participatory methods will provide a more in-depth understanding of how young people experience these processes, deepen the quality of the research they conduct and have greater and longer lasting impact on their school and community beneficiaries.

### Limitations

Upon reflection, there are several limitations of this study. The original intention of the researcher was to conduct a weekly research workshop with the group of pupil co-researchers across an eight-week period. This proposed scheduling would have allowed the research group to form their own evaluative research project, possibly recruiting other members of the NextGenLeaders programme involved in differing projects. However, due to a series of school strikes and timetabling clashes, only three research workshops were able to be completed. Subsequently, the research was adapted to become a more exploratory project focusing on the changemakers' perceptions of PBL. Whilst this was not the original intention for the project, the changemakers shared reflections and contributions throughout the three workshops have produced several valuable learning points for future YPAR as outlined above. Echoing the views of Flewitt and colleagues (2018), the rewards of enabling young people to be active agents throughout the research process far outweighed the frustrations of cancelled sessions and the siloed scheduling.

### Recommendations

Future research should involve researching alongside a group of student researchers from the outset of their NextGenLeaders programme, or other PBL/YPAR programmes, through to the conclusion of their project. This extended period of collaboration would enable young people and researchers to delve deeper into the process of collaborative enquiry. Additionally, this approach would enable young people to develop the cognitive, intra- and interpersonal competencies and affective skills (Dobson, 2023) they themselves identify, being independent researchers who improve the quality of research they undertake, allowing for their projects to have greater impact on the beneficiaries. As the changemakers indicated at the beginning of the project, this, after all, is their reason for engaging in PBL: to address social disadvantages and injustices in their local communities. It may also be beneficial to engage in participatory mapping (Emmel, 2008), which may prove to be a particularly useful method of shared reflection and exploration.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the changemakers who participated in this research project. Whilst the project was disrupted, the pupils' dedication, enthusiasm and perseverance throughout the research process unwaveringly remained. Additional thanks are paid to the NextGenLeaders facilitator and the project gatekeeper for their continued support throughout the project.








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Appendix A – Research Journal Template



## Weekly Notes


Key actions for the week:




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Record positive feedback here:



How did it make you feel?



Superpower	What went well?	What didn't go to plan?
 Curiosity		
 Creativity		
 Empathy		

Changemaker Consent  5 Date: \_\_\_\_\_







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