'Overlooked' young people must be crucial actors in creation of peaceful communities

Michael Ogunnusi, De Montfort University Leicester, United Kingdom

Summary

Young people, school, family, and community engagement is critical to addressing the community challenge of youth conflict and violence in contexts of high marginalisation and vulnerability. Young people are crucial actors in this, yet their contributions towards peaceful communities in schools and beyond are often overlooked. Using an innovative approach to school-based work and community work, the central aims of this project were to explore how young people understand and enact peace as part of their everyday life, and to strengthen cohesion between young people and different stakeholders and communities in response to the community challenges of youth peace, violence, and conflict.

Key recommendations

- **Understanding and involving young people.**
- **Moving from concepts to peace-Informed practice.**
- **Prioritising research-informed practice.**

Introduction

School, home, and community are often not 'safe spaces' for many young people (YP) in England as they experience direct violence, marginalisation, and conflict (Ogunnusi, 2006). Evidence shows that 'schools make ideal environments to challenge…harmful social and cultural norms...that tolerate violence towards others' (WHO 2019:2), this involves the type of 'peace education [that] may shape any or every experience in school … while recognizing the many rich opportunities that formal schooling allows for informal learning' (Cremin & Bevington, 2017); and 'that school and education-based approaches are effective in reducing youth violence' (Russell 2021:7). Yet, there is little research in England on how teachers, parents, and educational leaders outside school, can work with YP and the local community to collectively respond to issues of peace, conflict, and violence. Crucially, even less is known about how YP position themselves in relation to peace, and the ways they contribute to everyday peace in their lives and communities. Evidence suggests that engagement with YP is critical to address the community challenge of youth conflict and violence; and that participative methods can create opportunities for those who most experience violence (direct, structural, or cultural) to become an active part of the solution. (Ogunnusi, 2019, 2000, 2021)

About the study

By combining research and research-informed practice, the Young People Peace & Change project aimed to explore how YP in England understand peace in their everyday life, and what they do with this knowledge; and to encourage YP's solutions for peace in their communities. This work actively sought to foreground the voice of YP and apply new knowledge to existing collaboration practices for teaching and learning with YP, students, teachers, and practitioners in the community.

Data gathered longitudinally over two and a half years showed for the first time how YP in England understood peace as a tool of analysis for social change be this philosophical or practical; and what this means for their everyday life. Photovoice (PV) was used effectively with 21 YP, in five inner-city settings, to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns and to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important

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issues through group discussions of photographs (Wang and Burris 1997:369). YP clearly understood peace as representing more than the absence of violence and conflict, and they highlighted a disconnect between 'lived' peace, and the significance of change and peace. Findings further demonstrated how YP developed tactics to shape and navigate peace in their everyday life, including school and the community influenced by ideas of equality, respect, and social justice; and what this meant for their relationships with themselves and others. YP also took action for peace, seeking a community response, based on their own concerns and aspirations; explicitly expressed as a gesture towards social change in their immediate environment that included a collective hope to disrupt the consciousness of their audiences by opening a dialogue about what is known, or assumed about peace (Ogunnusi, 2000: 192). This resulted in youth-led community engagement in different contexts of high marginalisation and vulnerability.

In summary, the project: (1) shed light on the ways YP understands peace in the continuum of structure and agency in the minutiae of everyday life, and what this means for the conceptualisations of peace in peace studies. (2) Evidenced how YP's knowledge of peace contributes to peace, and what YP do with what they know, which is rarely documented longitudinally. And, (3) methodologically, an original approach to PV influenced by Participatory Action Research, theoretically rooted in dialogue that seeks to problematise and act in the world, enabling genuine opportunities for participation - creating a safe space for self-introspection, dialogue with peers, and for action, engaging communities, and connecting with wider audiences, to 'speak back' with the research. Additionally, YP reported having increased knowledge, self-confidence, and increased skills for group work, collaboration, decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, and critical analysis, such as making links between personal and political.

The study has shown great potential for replicability and local engagement with significantly marginalised or at-risk communities, whom themselves recognised trends by which they were ignored or misrepresented as youths. Working towards community-based change within schools and the broader community, the learning from the project continues to inform opportunities for YP and adults to actively share their ideas and solutions for peace, promoting knowledge transfer to develop the capacity of teachers, youth workers, and educational leaders beyond the school walls, for everyday learning and teaching practices. This work has also been shown to play an important role with YP at risk. (Ogunnusi 2020; 2021)

As one example, learning from the Young People Peace & Change project has contributed towards the MinusViolencePlusPeace and Positive Peace programmes facilitated with Peacemakers (WMQPEP) in 14 schools since 2018. This work was originally developed in response to funding from the Home Office, and later from the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, to work with young people and schools in response to youth violence in areas of high marginalisation in Birmingham. To conclude, research aimed at furthering social justice with marginalised communities, that aims to serve those communities, such as YP who are underrepresented, misrepresented, overlooked, vulnerable, or at risk of violence, can be a valuable tool in educational, youth, and peace work.

Results and conclusions

It is commonly understood that young people have a right (and a need) to learn peace, and to live peacefully (UNESCO, 2002); and that learning peace and finding ways to 'do' peace, can be beneficial for those involved. Yet, YP remain disproportionately vulnerable to violence, and the evidence suggests they feel disconnected from 'lived' peace. Evidence for the Young People Peace & Change project suggests that through a learning process in the context of research YP have (re)worded and (re)known peace as part of their social existence, and so come to understand and enact peace more often. More specifically, the findings have illustrated how YP have given meaning to peace (through their own words, photography, group dialogue, and action), as something situated and contextualised in ways that are deeply experiential, placed, non-reductionist, visceral, observable, temporal, routine, culturally significant, set within the continuum of praxis in their everyday life. Generally, our knowledge of peace needs to be studied more, promoted more, and critically reframed.

It is vital that practitioners become 'peace-informed' with young people in a way that is informal, and responsive and flexible; building on what the young people introduce at the time, as well as drawing from existing theory, methods, and 'curriculum' (Ogunnusi, 2021). Such work can be supported by independent learning about peace theory that carries important messages about the normalisation of violence, transforming conflicts of different types, managing conflict non-violently, and 'positive peace'. Advancing peace-informed practice may also require identifying foundational knowledge, foundational skills, scaffolded by coaching and supervision, and collaboration and partnership working (Ogunnusi 2021). At an organisational level, being more peace-informed may involve reviewing mission and vision statements, organisational practices, and code of ethics, reviewing organisational capacity (training, curricula, and practice), potential partners, networking and outreach strategies, and impact/evidence (Besseling *et al,* 2014).

The process and findings of research have been shown to be inextricably linked to educational practice; defying the idea that research is only for researchers and that it is too burdensome or complicated for educators. In keeping with a PAR approach, YP in the project have taken action for peace seeking a community response; and learning from the project has been used to develop a greater understanding of peace and conflict for YP, students, teachers, youth workers, and educational leaders. These examples of knowledge transfer can help those involved to be better equipped to engage positively in the community in schools and outside the school walls.

Recommendations

The six recommendations below are intended to help you reflect on your own position, and how the work you do might strengthen young people's knowledge and experience of peace. Each one can be responded to with carefully co-ordinated training and support activities.

Understanding and involving young people

1. Identify how you/your organisation understand young people and their behaviour with regards to peace, conflict, and violence, including young people who might be marginalised or at risk of youth violence.
2. Critically assess if your practice informs or tests your existing knowledge about young people and peace, conflict, and violence; and the extent to which this knowledge is co-created with young people.
3. Create regular opportunities to discover and discuss young people's lived experience of peace, conflict, and violence, including how they contribute to everyday peace, and what helps them to manage violence and conflict.

Moving from concepts to practice

4. Research and define how your practice can be (more) 'peace-informed', and what it would mean to be "peace-informed" at an organisational level.
5. Evaluate how you/your organisation understand some of the complexities of 'genuinely' engaging young people, making contact and encouraging active participation, with a view to building involvement and responsibility to strengthen young people's peace.

Prioritising Research-Informed Practice

6. Develop research opportunities and research-informed practice to further understand how to thicken young people's agency and support them as social actors for peace in school and the community.

About the author

Michael Ogunnusi has award-winning expertise in Photovoice and successfully completed his doctorate in 2020 focused on how young people understand and take action for peace in everyday life. His interests include replicable methods for youth voice, action, and impact, and how participation strategies for how young people can become an integral part of organisational culture, programmes, and providing. An experienced and qualified youth and community worker, and social worker, Michael joined De Montfort University's Youth and Community Division in 2009. His background also includes civil rights work and police monitoring, research, and advocacy with children in care. Michael continues as an experienced youth worker and peace educator, with more than 20 years of experience.

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