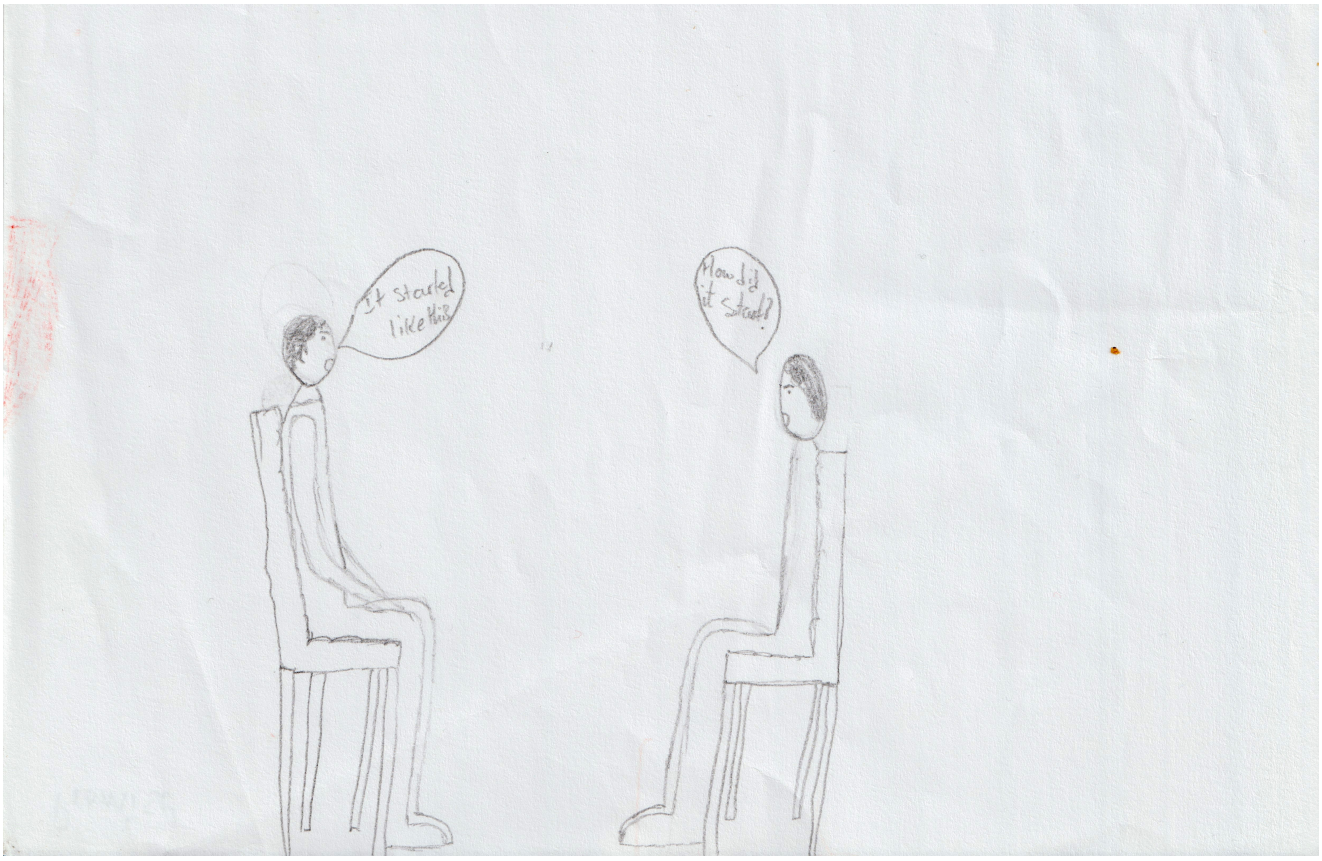
Inquiry into the utilisation of optimistic reflection on our better nature as a means of positive influence.

Can prosocial behaviour, attitudes and aspirations be fostered by sustained exposure to the portrayal of human nature as innately altruistic?



Author: Alex West

Supervisor: Dr Helen Demetriou

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between children's beliefs about human nature and their engagement in prosocial behaviour. Drawing inspiration from Zhuojun Yao and Robert Enright's study, "Belief in altruistic human nature and prosocial behaviour," this research expands upon their findings by examining changes in the behaviour and attitudes of children after sustained exposure to positive ideas about human nature within an educational context. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study involves quantitative analysis of questionnaires, along with qualitative exploration through activities, interviews, and conversations. Despite encountering challenges during the research process, this study provides valuable insights into potential avenues for educational and policy advancements. It also underscores the significance of clear strategies and approaches aimed at fostering prosocial attitudes, not merely within young individuals, but in, and for, society as a whole.

Introduction

A brief outline of the idea and plan

This paper aims to be a comprehensive exploration of the connection between children's beliefs about human nature, and their involvement in prosocial behaviour. Following the work of Zhuojun Yao and Robert Enright which highlighted a correlation between belief in human nature as altruistic and prosocial behaviour, this study investigates how these beliefs can be developed through education whereby changes in children's perspectives lead to prosocial self-efficacy. This research aims to offer a deeper understanding of how young individuals develop and exhibit altruism.

Aims

The original objective of this research revolved around monitoring shifts in individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour to assess the impact of engaging with positive messages about human beings and human nature. However, due to the constraints to be discussed later, this paper ultimately seeks to present the data collected and examine student engagement with activities and resources designed to impart positive ideas about human nature to students.

Review of literature

Existing research in this area has primarily explored the relationship between altruistic beliefs and prosocial behaviour. Studies have sought to determine whether individuals holding optimistic beliefs about human nature are more likely to exhibit altruistic tendencies. To act altruistically is to act in the interest of another person's welfare where there is no goal of personal gain. Therefore, in essence, to hold the belief that human beings are naturally inclined to act altruistically is to believe that they are predisposed to consider others and act in their best interest without selfish motives. Prosocial behaviour is behaviour intended to help or benefit others and society. It includes behaviours such as caring, cooperating, volunteering, helping, and sharing. In the context of prosocial behaviour, there may be an anticipation of social or psychological rewards.

Yao, Zhuojun & Enright, Robert. (2019). Belief in altruistic human nature and prosocial behavior: a serial mediation analysis. Ethics & Behavior. 30. 1-15. 10.1080/10508422.2019.1591963.

Zhuojun Yao and Robert Enright's study acted as a fundamental inspiration and starting point for this research.

Their work established a foundation for exploring the interplay between altruistic beliefs and prosocial actions and emphasised the significance of individuals' beliefs in altruistic human nature as a driving force behind prosocial behaviour. Their investigation of the potential influence belief in altruistic human nature has on prosocial behaviour showed that the former indirectly influences the latter through causally linked multiple mediators of prosocial attitudes and prosocial self-efficacy. It was suggested that mass media and education elaboration could be used to promote these beliefs to reduce prejudices and to spread a sense of connectedness. Within the paper, it was asserted that longitudinal and experimental studies were needed to explore these connections.

This research attempted to take up this mandate directly, by providing an experimental study examining this influencing mechanism and its real-life effect, and by developing methods and establishing insight into the effectiveness of said methods by which this process can be animated within an educational context.

Research Question

The initial research question guiding this study

1. Can prosocial behaviour, attitudes and aspirations be fostered by sustained exposure to the portrayal of human nature as innately altruistic?

Methodology

The school

The participating school is located in the North of England and was rated outstanding in its most recent Ofsted report. The school is very diverse, and whilst Catholic, students have a great variety of religious backgrounds. Many of the parents at the school speak English as a second language and there is great emphasis placed on learning about diversity, inclusion, and equality. While the school's capacity stands at 240, the number of pupils is 264. Class sizes are generally around 30 students; the year 5 classes discussed in this paper are each made up of 30-32 students. The school is located in one of the most deprived wards in its city, with a median household income of £20,721 (2015) and 28.1% of children receiving Free School Meals (2017); 35.2% of the current students at the school are eligible for free school meals. The school also supports many students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The school is a place of inclusivity and this is also greatly apparent in much of the educational focus. This is outlined in the 2022 Ofsted report; “Pupils value and respect one another. They have a strong sense of belonging to a community. Pupils also learn about the wider world through exploring other faiths and cultures.”, “The school is a joy to walk around.”

Sample/Participants

Given that younger children are less likely to have been exposed to, or conditioned to believe negative depictions of human nature, it was appropriate for the research to be conducted within a year 5 classroom with students aged 9-10. The intervention group was made up of 32 students. To help ensure internal validity, it was intended that a corresponding control group, made up of 30 students of the same year group, would also take part in answering questionnaires. While some complications arose which prevented a second set of questionnaires from being completed by the control group, the initial questions were completed by a total of 62 students. Parents of the classes were also asked to

participate by filling in two sets of questions, pre- and post-research. A total of 28 of the first set were handed in and 15 of the second set. The teacher from the intervention class also participated in the study by filling in a set of 32 questionnaires that concerned each of their students.

Process

The process began with initial engagement and communication with the school, followed by discussions to establish a mutually agreed-upon time frame. Originally, a time frame of four weeks was envisioned for the research project; however, due to the intense demands of the end-of-term, this period was subsequently condensed. Consequently, the research activities were conducted over a span of seven days, encompassing a total of seven sessions. Further sessions were conducted by teachers during which students completed the questionnaires and a booklet originally intended as homework, and where the class watched positive news stories that had been allocated. Additionally, there were interview sessions with students which took place post-research.

Time Allocation and Sessions

The allocated time for each research session ranged from forty-five minutes to one hour. Over the course of the seven-day period, a total of seven distinct tasks and activities were completed with the participating class. These sessions were scheduled at the same time each day. While the conducted sessions demonstrated positive outcomes, the limitation of a much smaller number of sessions significantly impacted the research's potential outcomes and conclusions.

Resources

Prior to the commencement of the research, substantial effort was invested in developing a variety of classroom activities. As it was not possible for all the established activities to be integrated into the research, continual adjustments and adaptations were made to tasks to ensure that the activities employed were tailored to be relevant to the research objectives and optimally utilised the available time.

Data Collection

Various methods of data collection were employed in this research, including the administration of questionnaires (two sets for students, two sets for parents, and one for teachers), engaging in conversations, collecting drawings, distributing activity sheets, reviewing completed tasks, and conducting interviews.

Questionnaires

A central form of data collection involved the administration of multiple questionnaires. For students, two sets of questionnaires were distributed during class time by the teacher: a pre-research questionnaire and a post-research questionnaire. Similarly, parents were also provided with pre- and post-research questionnaires to gauge their perspectives and gain a greater insight into the behaviour of students. Initially, two sets of questionnaires were also intended for teachers; however, owing to their constrained schedules, only one questionnaire was completed midway through the research period.

Interviews

After completing the research period, interviews were conducted with students allowing them to elaborate on their ideas and express their thoughts and opinions. These interviews provided valuable qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires.

The interview phase supplemented the overall data collection process by offering a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives and shed light on their engagement with the research.

In summation, the research process encompassed communication with the school, negotiation of a condensed time frame, administration of questionnaires to students, parents, and teachers, execution of multiple research sessions within a limited timeframe, resource adaptation, and supplementary data collection through interviews. Despite challenges stemming from time limitations, the process generated valuable insights that contribute to the broader research objectives.

Activities and tasks

Please refer to the Appendix section for a comprehensive description and explanation of all the activities and tasks that have been devised for this research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics Committee Approval

Prior to initiating the research, formal approval was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Cambridge.

Enhanced DBS Check

In recognition of the sensitive nature of the research involving students, an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check was conducted for the researcher.

Opt-Out Consent Forms

All parents were provided with opt-out consent forms to sign on behalf of their children. These forms granted individuals the opportunity to decline participation without any obligation or consequence.

Informed Consent for Interviews

On the condition that parents had not opted out on behalf of the child, students were able to volunteer to participate in interviews. The consent process included an explanation of the interview content, disclosure of the recording aspect, and the assurance that participants could skip questions or request the removal of any information during or after the interview.

Data Anonymisation

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, any identifying information has been removed from the collected data.

Results and discussion

The research adopts a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, capitalising on both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. Quantitative analysis intended to highlight changes in children's responses between pre- and post-research questionnaires. Qualitative insights, derived from activities, interviews, and written responses, provide a nuanced understanding of children's perspectives.

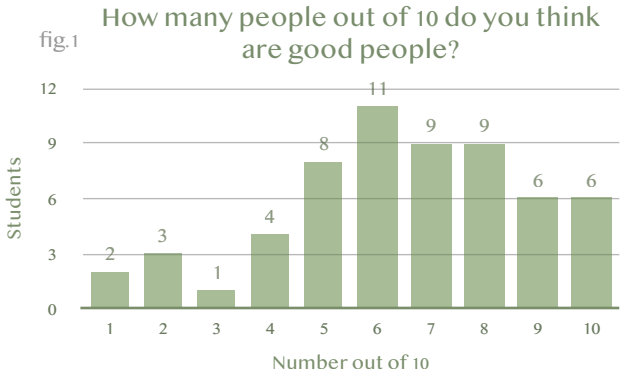
Students

Below is a selection of charts showing answers from the first student questionnaire.

First Questionnaire (pre-research) - 57 students

Section 1: Beliefs about others

fig.1



Discussion - fig.1

Figure 1 illustrates that, predominantly, students held the perception that at least half of people were good individuals, with a greater number of students providing ratings on the higher end of the scale rather than the lower end.

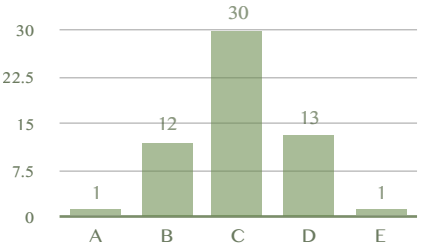
See discussion of figure 2 and figure 3 below.

Discussion - fig. 2 and fig. 3

While Figure 1 indicates that students were inclined to believe in the goodness of a greater portion of the population, Figures 2 and 3 reveal a contrasting sentiment; students expressed a lack of trust and asserted that people are prone to lying.

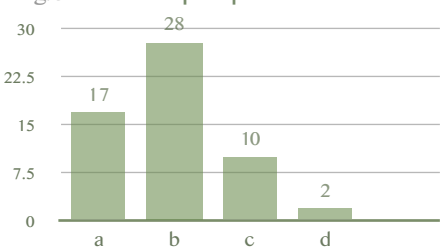
It is plausible that students perceive lying as sometimes acceptable or necessary, and so not inherently wrong. However, the fact that they do not generally view most people as trustworthy suggests a perspective contrasting with the belief communicated in Figure 1.

fig. 2



a) Yes, I trust most people
b) Most of the time I trust people
c) Sometimes I trust people
d) I don't trust people very often
e) I almost never trust people

fig. 3



a) Definitely, most people lie
b) Kind of, some people lie
c) Kind of not true, only a few people lie
d) Definitely not, most people don't lie

fig. 4

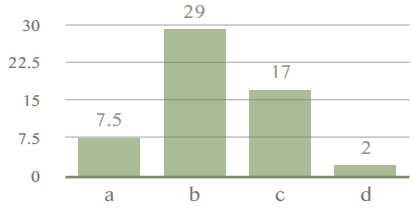


a) Yes, most people want to make the world a better place.
b) I mostly think so
c) Sometimes
d) Not really, most people don't care about making the world better.
e) No, most people do not want to make the world a better place.

Discussion - fig. 4

Figure 4 illustrates that, for the most part, students hold the belief that people want to make the world a better place. This indicates an initial level of optimism in the potential for positive change in the world.

fig. 5



a) Yes, I think so.
b) Some people do, some people don't.
c) I'm not sure.
d) No, I don't think so.

Discussion - fig. 5

Here, students recognise that while some individuals are inclined to support others, there are also those who do not share this tendency. This observation suggests that students do not hold a generalised belief in the widespread inclination of people to support each other, possibly influenced by their personal experiences.

Section 2: Self-reflection and human nature

fig. 7



a) Being a good person is harder
b) Being a bad person is harder

fig. 9

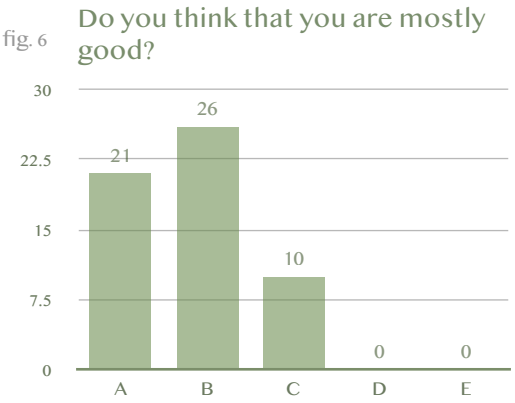


a) Being kind is easier.
b) It's a little easier to be kind.
c) Both are the same.
d) It's a little easier to be mean.
e) No, being mean is easier. I have to work hard to be kind.

Discussion - fig. 7 and fig. 9

At times, the results appear somewhat contradictory, as evidenced in this instance. Students have predominantly expressed the view that being a good person is challenging (Figure 7), but they have also indicated that it is comparatively easier, or at least not more difficult, to be kind rather than unkind (Figure 9).

fig. 6



a) Yes, I am mostly good
b) Kind of, I try to be good
c) Kind of, sometimes I am not good
d) No, I am not really good
e) No, I am mostly bad

fig. 8



a) Yes, it's easy for me to avoid doing something wrong
b) Kind of, sometimes it's easy and sometimes it's hard/it depends on the situation
c) No, it's not easy for me to avoid doing something wrong

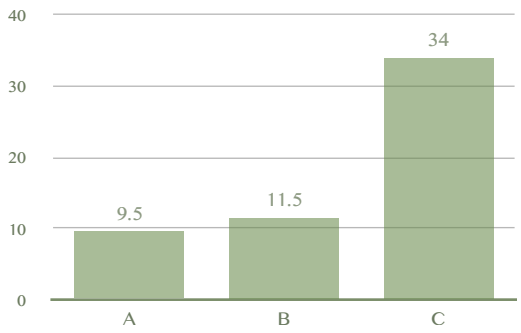
Discussion - fig.6 and fig.8

The results presented here appear to align with the sentiments expressed in Figure 7, wherein students acknowledge that at times, refraining from actions they perceive as wrong can be challenging. However, akin to the observations made in Figure 1, students predominantly view themselves as good individuals, or at least that they strive to be.

This suggests a prevailing notion that they must exert conscious effort to uphold goodness, implying that they may not consider themselves inherently good but rather recognise the necessity of deliberate effort to be so.

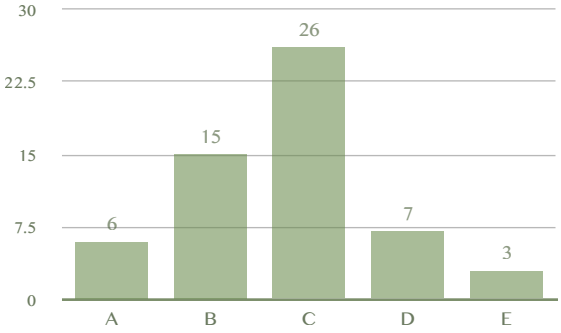
Section 3: Sharing

Who should you share with? fig.10



a) I should only share with people who share with me.
b) If people do not share with me, I should not share with them.
c) I believe in sharing regardless of what others do.

Do you like sharing? fig. 11



a) Yes, I love sharing.
b) I mostly like sharing.
c) Sometimes I like sharing but it depends on who I am sharing with.
d) I rarely like sharing.
e) No, I don't like sharing.

Discussion - fig.10 and fig.11

Although students have expressed their belief in the importance of sharing irrespective of others' actions, they have also indicated that their willingness to share depends on the individuals with whom they are sharing. This dual perspective could suggest that students may indeed share with others regardless of reciprocation but may not necessarily find enjoyment in doing so.

Alternatively, it may signify that while they believe in sharing with everyone, their actual behaviour might not consistently align with this belief.

Section 4: Thinking about the future

Do you think things are getting better or worse?



fig.12

a) I think things are getting better.
b) I mostly think things are getting better but there are some things that worry me.
c) Sometimes I think things are getting better, sometimes I think they are not.
d) I mostly think things are getting worse but sometimes I am hopeful
e) I think things are getting worse.

Discussion - fig.12

Figure 12 highlights that the students have particular concerns about the future. This was also evident from the drawings made by the intervention group during the 'Ideal World' sessions where they juxtaposed what they deemed an ideal world with the real world. There was a primary focus on climate change.

See Ideal World drawings on page 15 for examples.

Significant limitations to be noted

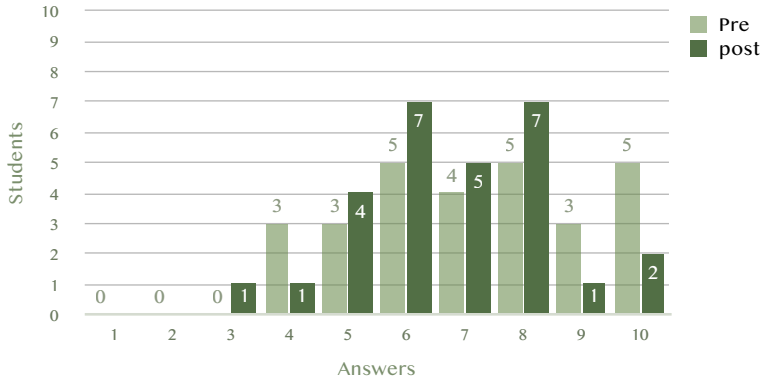
Prior to looking at the comparative answers presented below, it is important to acknowledge several limitations inherent in this research.

- First, due to the time constraints, it is challenging to definitively ascertain the extent to which prolonged exposure could have shaped children's viewpoints. The restricted number of sessions significantly constrained the capacity to impact students' beliefs and attitudes.
- Moreover, the research took place during the hectic end-of-term period, during which teachers noted changes in class behaviour, potentially affecting the overall environment.
- Furthermore, the researcher was not present during the administration of the questionnaires, making it difficult to fully understand the context in which they were completed. The extended duration required for children to sit and complete the questionnaires, particularly amidst the excitement of end-of-term activities, may have influenced their willingness to participate and possibly skewed their responses towards a more negative sentiment, especially in the second questionnaire.
- The absence of a control group hinders the ability to make direct comparisons and discover how these factors may have impacted the results.

Intervention group - pre- and post-research questionnaires (28 students)

Section 1: Beliefs about others

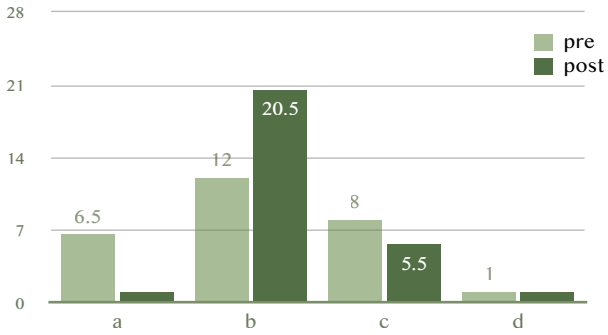
How many people out of 10 do you think are good people?



Discussion - fig. 13

Unexpectedly, as evident in this figure, students appeared to develop a somewhat more pessimistic outlook on humanity after the completion of the study. They tended to express the belief that a lower proportion of individuals were inherently good. Through discussions with the students, it became apparent that this shift in perspective could be attributed, at least in part, to the study's focus on highlighting the positive contributions made by individuals, which inevitably drew attention to the challenges facing humanity, many of which are caused by human actions.

Do you feel like most people want to support each other?



a) Yes, I think so.
b) Some people do, some people don't.
c) I'm not sure.
d) No, I don't think so.

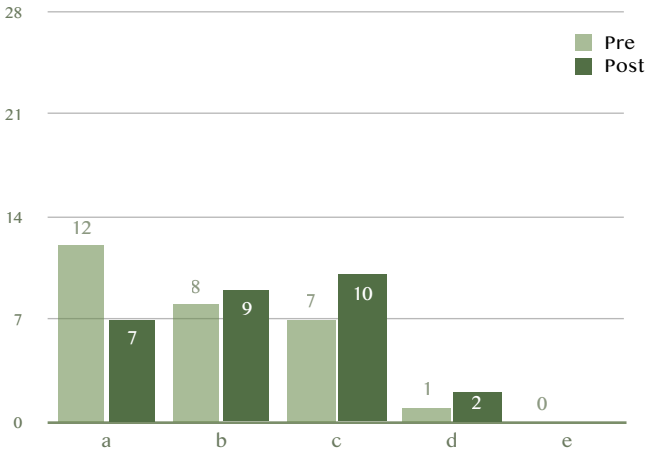
Discussion - fig. 14

In Figure 2, a noticeable shift can be observed as children transitioned from a belief that the majority of people want to support each other to the perspective that some individuals do while others do not.

There is no definite explanation of this shift. The reasoning can only be assumed to resemble that which was stated in the discussion of Figure 1: the emphasis on positive role models and their altruistic endeavours may have inadvertently underscored the challenges stemming from human actions and this potentially cast a somewhat negative light on the students' perception of human beings as inherently caring.

Do you think that most people want to make the world a better place?

fig.15



a) Yes, most people want to make the world a better place.
b) I mostly think so
c) Sometimes
d) Not really, most people don't care about making the world better.
e) No, most people do not want to make the world a better place.

Discussion - fig. 15

Figure 15 presents an unexpected and intriguing result. It indicates that students are somewhat less inclined to believe that people want to make the world a better place. This outcome appears to contradict the positive messages and role models they were exposed to throughout the research.

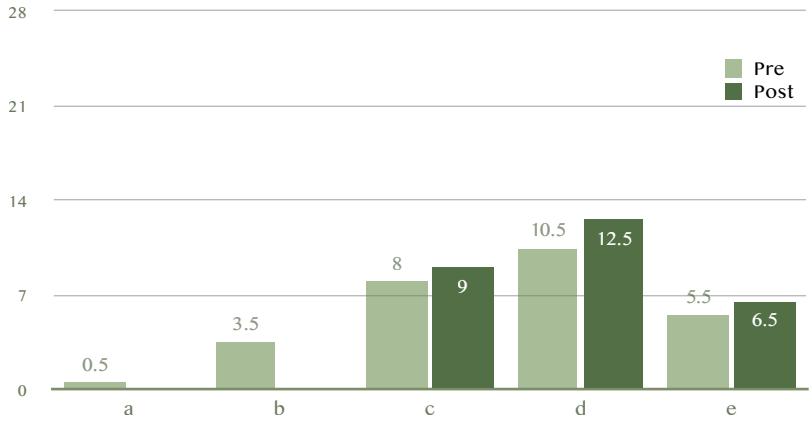
However, as previously discussed, this shift in perception may be attributed to the heightened awareness of the challenges and issues stemming from human actions that may have been unintentionally emphasised.

Conducting a more extended research study would be valuable to ascertain whether this change in perception endures over time or evolves with continued exposure to positive influences. The inclusion of a control group was essential as this would've helped to determine if the end-of-term factors had any influence on the results.

Section 2: Reflection on personal attitudes, behaviour, and responses to others

Your friend has had a really hard week. They have been in lots of trouble at home and are finding things difficult. At school, you are talking to them and they suddenly get really angry and shout something horrible at you. It hurts your feelings. Which option is most similar to what you would think about your friend?

fig.16



a) I would shout something back, who do they think they are?
b) That is horrible of them. I wouldn't want to be friends with them anymore.
c) Even though I know they have been having a hard time that is no excuse. If they have been getting into trouble that is probably because they have been behaving badly and that's their fault. I wouldn't talk to them for a while.
d) Even though I wouldn't agree with what they had done, I know they really need a friend right now so I would try to forgive them.
e) I don't think what they said would really matter. Even if it did hurt my feelings there is clearly something going on if they lashed out. I would ask them if they were okay and if they wanted to talk about anything.

Discussion - fig. 16

Figure 16 presents a positive outcome. There is a slight shift in students' responses towards options d) and e), which reflect more empathetic ways of responding to their friend's situation. This suggests that the empathy-focused activities may have had a positive impact. Interviews with some students indicated that the empathy activity had left an impression on them.

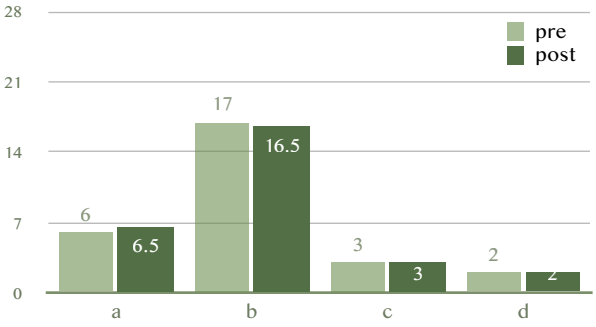
However, as previously mentioned, the reliability of the results is compromised by various factors.

It would be intriguing to explore the potential impact of an extended research period and the use of additional similar questions.

Moreover, it would have been valuable to assess students' behaviour through input from parents and teachers over time to determine if they exhibited a greater inclination towards empathy. Future research could also incorporate activities designed to gauge students' empathy tendencies more directly.

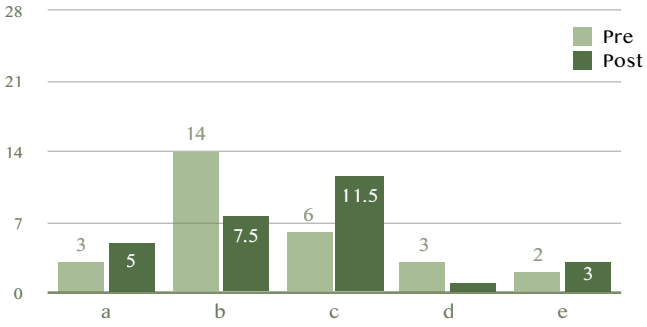
Section 3: Aspirations, self-efficacy and the future

If you don't think something is fair, is it up to you to try and help change it?



a) Yes, I believe it's up to me to help change things
b) Sometimes I feel like it's my responsibility to help change things
c) I don't think it's usually my role to change things
d) No, I don't think it's up to me to change things

Do you think things are getting better or worse?



a) I think things are getting better.
b) I mostly think things are getting better but there are some things that worry me.
c) Sometimes I think things are getting better, sometimes I think they are not.
d) I mostly think things are getting worse but sometimes I am hopeful
e) I think things are getting worse.

Discussion - fig.17

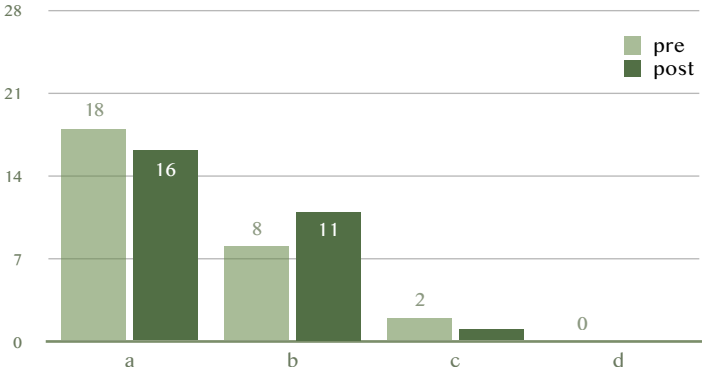
Figure 7 exhibits minimal alterations in students' answers. Over a more extended period, the expectation would be for more pronounced changes to occur.

Similar patterns are evident in many of the comparative charts, so they have not been included.

Discussion - fig.18

Figure 18 demonstrates varying shifts in answers across different points of view, making it challenging to pinpoint a specific cause for these changes or attribute them directly to the research. It would have been anticipated that if the research were the primary factor influencing these shifts, the changes in answers would have been more consistent among all students. However, this figure suggests a more complex and diverse response pattern which could be due to a range of factors unrelated to the research.

Do you want to make a difference?



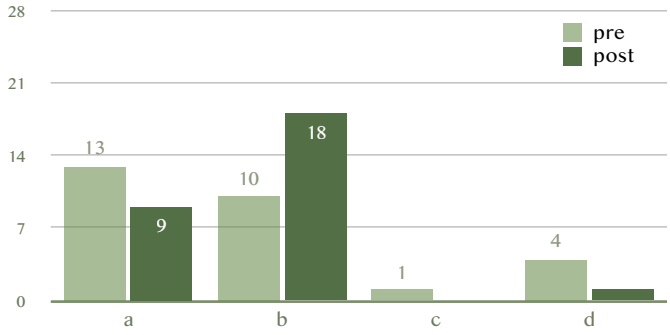
a) Yes, I want to make a difference in the world.
b) Sometimes I want to make a difference, but it is not my main goal.
c) I don't feel strongly about making a difference. I have different goals.
d) No, I don't really care about making a difference.

Discussion - fig.19

The findings in Figure 19 reveal that children are less inclined to aspire to make a difference after the research was conducted. This result is intriguing, considering the research's nature. It could be argued that these results may not be representative of the research's potential impact under optimal conditions. However, the current data suggest that the emphasis on positive change by individuals has somewhat reduced children's eagerness to make future changes. This reduction is not to the extent that they no longer wish to get involved at all, but rather that it is not their primary goal, as they have other priorities.

fig.20

Do you think you have the ability to make a difference?



a) Yes, I have the ability to make a difference.
b) I mostly think so but sometimes I feel unsure.
c) I mostly don't think I have the ability to make a difference.
d) No, I don't think I have the ability to make a difference.

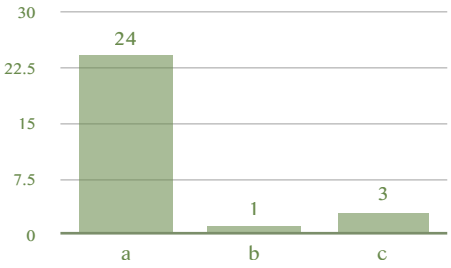
Discussion - fig.20

Similarly to Figure 19 above, Figure 20 appears to depict a minor decrease in children's self-efficacy. Students seem to be somewhat less optimistic about their capacity to effect change after witnessing the impactful actions of others. However, there has also been a slight decrease in students stating that they feel unable to make a difference and overall, the responses exhibit a more positive tone, suggesting potential for future work of a similar nature.

It's possible that children who initially had a strong belief in their capacity to effect change became somewhat disheartened upon learning about the work of others who grappled with significant challenges in the world. The specific factors contributing to these changes are difficult to pinpoint with certainty.

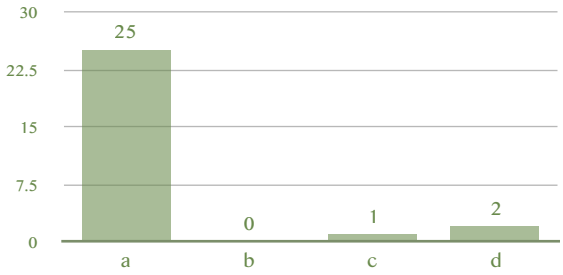
Student feedback

Have you enjoyed being a part of this research?



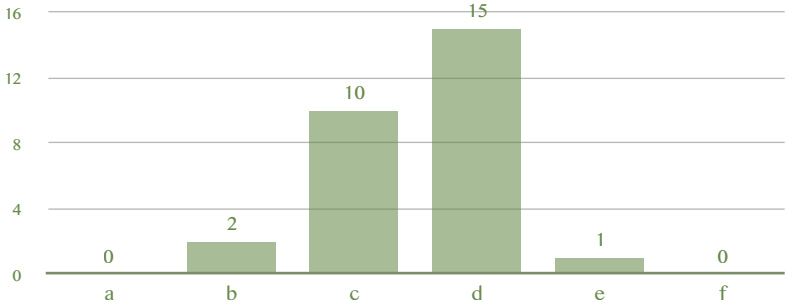
a) Yes
b) No
c) Kind of

Have you enjoyed doing different activities in class?



a) Yes
b) No
c) I didn't notice a difference
d) I'm not sure

If you had the chance to do activities like these more often, would you want to?



a) I didn't really notice a difference from normal class so I wouldn't care.
b) I noticed a difference but I'm not sure if I would.
c) Yes, I would probably like to if I had the chance
d) Yes, I would definitely like to if I had the chance
e) No I would probably not like to if I had the chance
f) No, I would definitely not like to if I had the chance

Discussion - Student Feedback

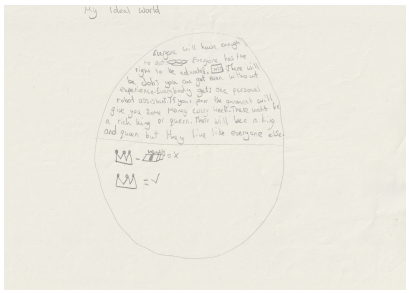
The positive feedback received from students can be considered a form of validation for the research.

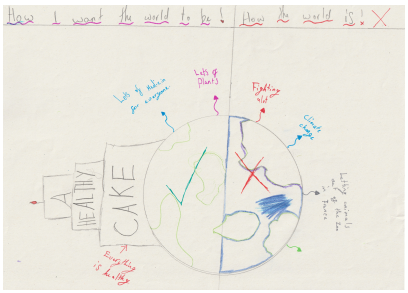
Almost every student exhibited positivity and enthusiasm in their responses, and these sentiments are clearly reflected in their feedback. A major part of this research has been about developing and testing potential methods for teaching children about positive concepts, which can help foster positive attitudes and approaches toward both others and themselves. The fact that students not only enjoyed the tasks but also expressed their desire to continue them represents an exceptionally favourable outcome.

Ideal World - Task 1

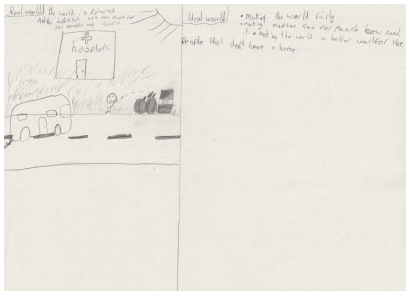
Students were asked to describe their ideal world. Many students described worlds where the environment was cared for.

A small selection of their work:

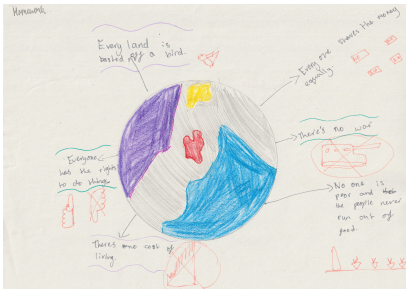


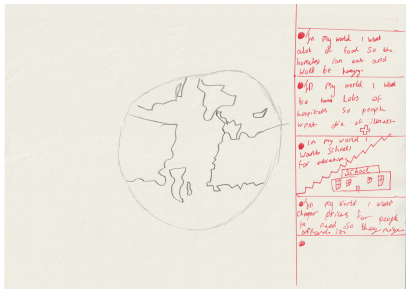




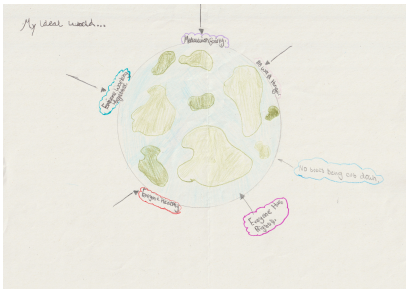




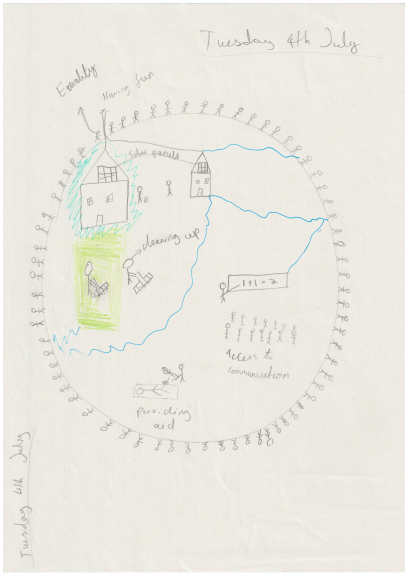


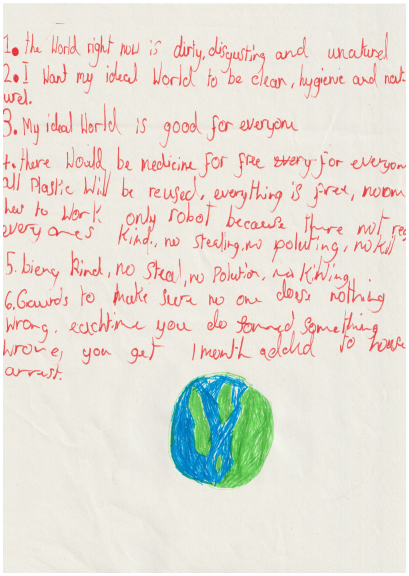


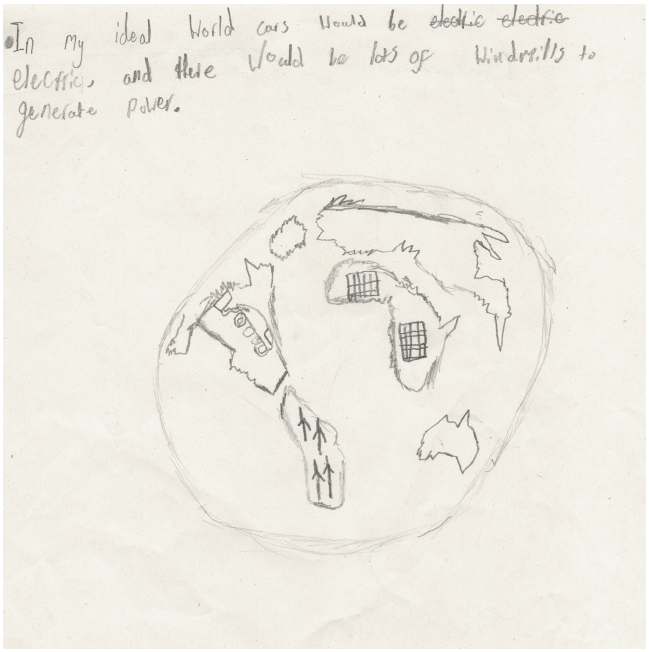












Casting Light on Profound Environmental Concerns

Almost every child chose to discuss climate related issues in their work. This research, if anything, serves to highlight the depth of worry and concern that children feel about the state the world and its future, as well as their own place in it.

Quotes related to the environment

"In my ideal world cars would be electric and there would be lots of windmills to generate power."

"The world looks like damage but my ideal world would look like more green, more trees. I would want no cars."

"There would be a recycling area for every neighbourhood."

"The world right now is dirty, disgusting, and unnatural. I want my ideal world to be clean, hygienic and natural."



Quotes about wealth

"In my world I want cheaper things for people so they can afford it."

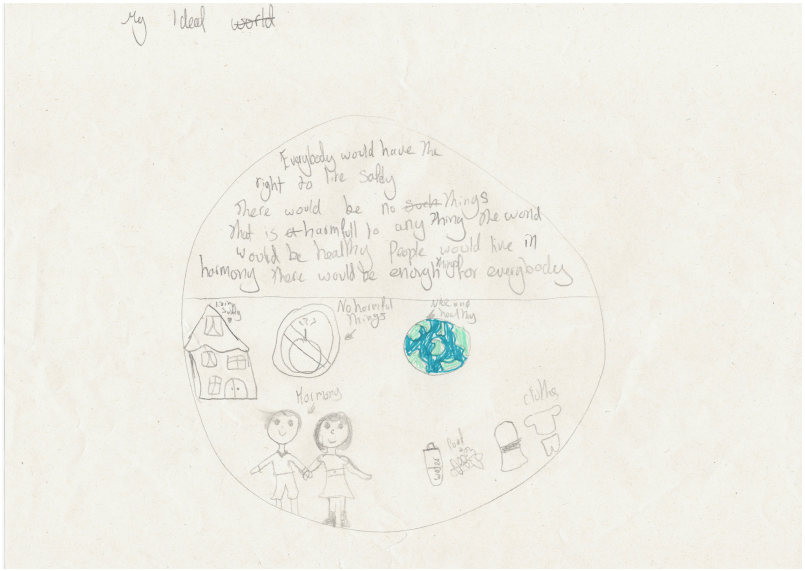
"There would be enough things for everyone."

"Everyone shares the money equally."

"There would be no cost of living."

"There will be jobs you can get even without experience."

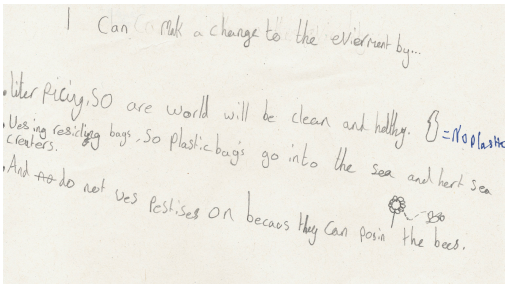
"If you are poor, the government will give you some money every week."

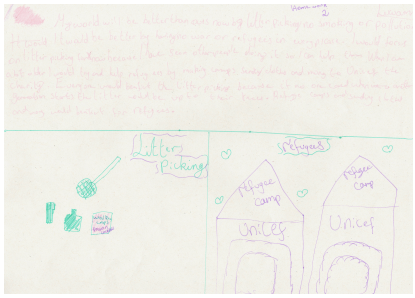


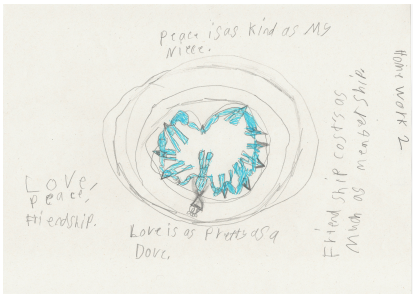
Ideal World - Task 2

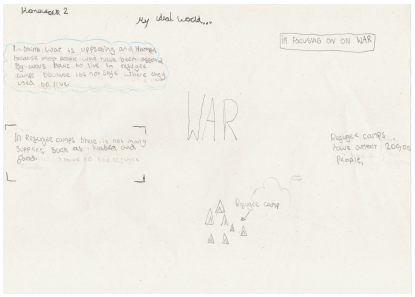
Students were asked to describe the changes necessary to transform our world into their ideal world.

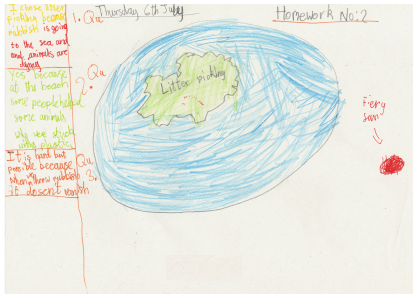
A small selection of their work:

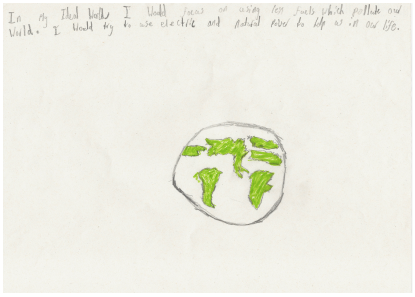


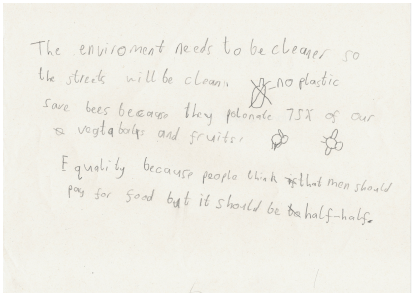


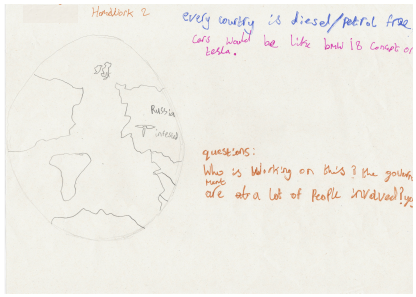


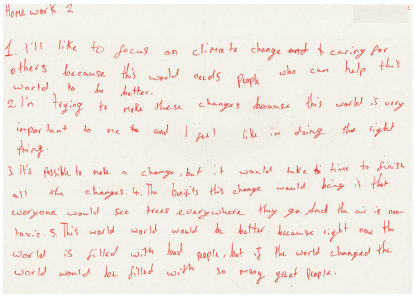


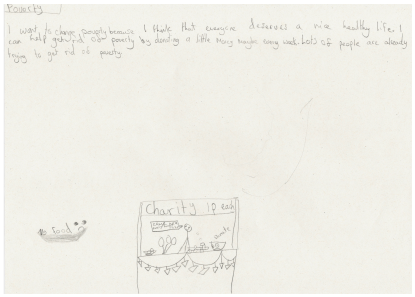




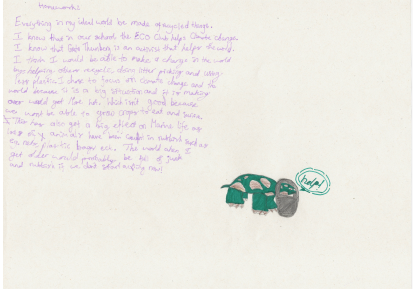


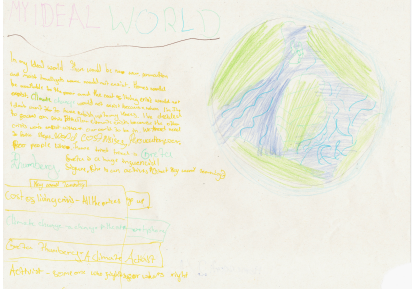


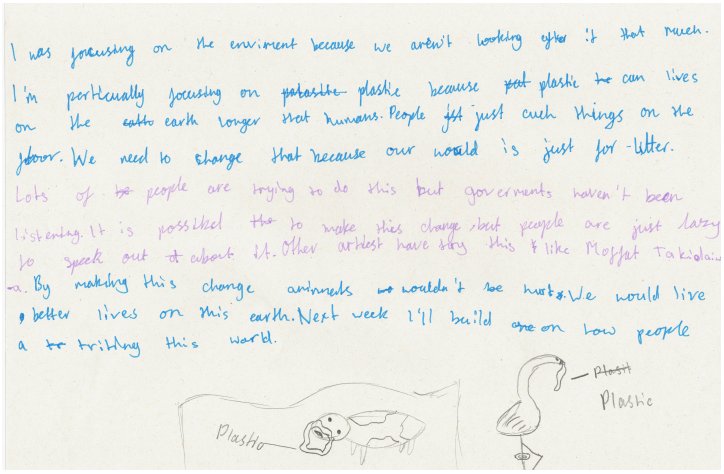


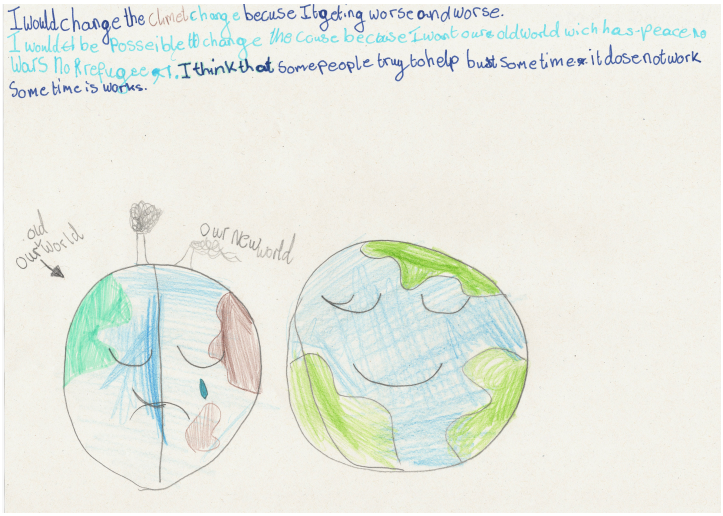












"I would change the climate change because it's getting worse and worse."

"The climate is really important because we have to have a nice environment so animals don't choke on plastic"

"The environment is important because we need to breathe and if we can't breathe we will die."

Casting Light on Profound Environmental Concerns (continued)

As evident from these examples, a substantial portion of students articulated significant concerns regarding the planet and the environment in their work. Their awareness of climate-related issues is apparent, and they harbour genuine apprehensions about these challenges.

The research findings revealed that all students had environmental concerns and shared a collective unease about the state of the world. The prevalence of these concerns could potentially elucidate why the limited number of research sessions conducted failed to influence the students' perspectives. It is evident that even students of this age possess a profound understanding of the gravity of the issues confronting our world.

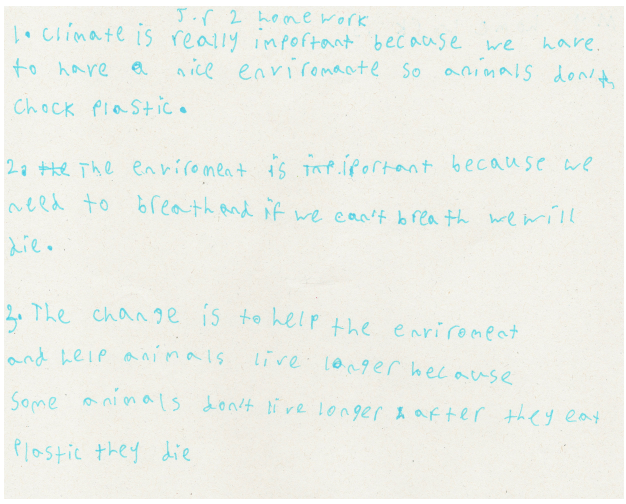
Quotes related to the environment

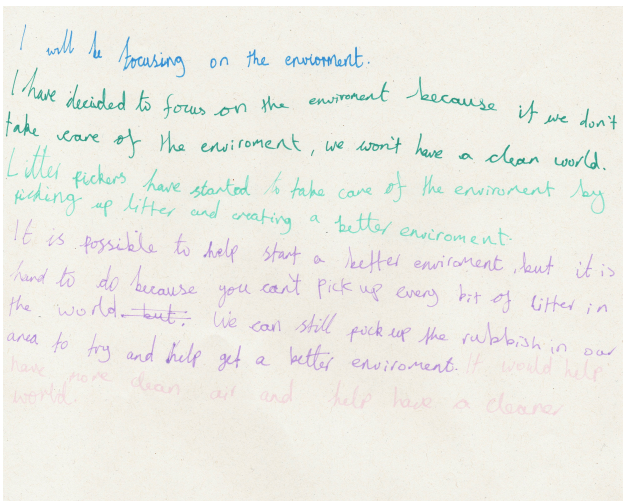
"I was focusing on the environment because we aren't looking after it that much. I'm particularly focusing on plastic because plastic can live on the earth longer than humans."

"Lots of people are trying to do this [help the environment] but governments haven't been listening. It is possible to make this change but people are just lazy to speak out about it."

"It is possible to help start a better environment but it is hard to do because you can't pick up every bit of litter in the world. We can still pick up the rubbish in our area to try and help…"

"I think that some people try to help but sometimes it does not work."

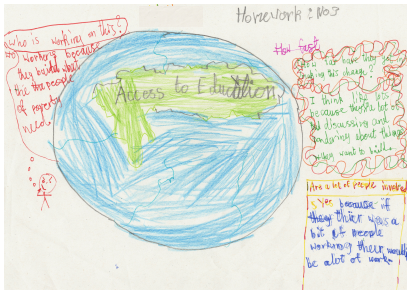


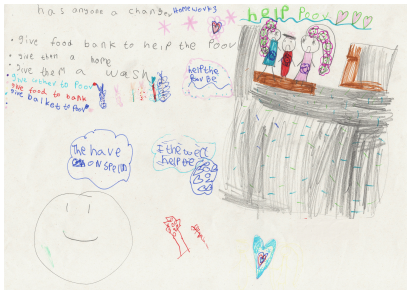


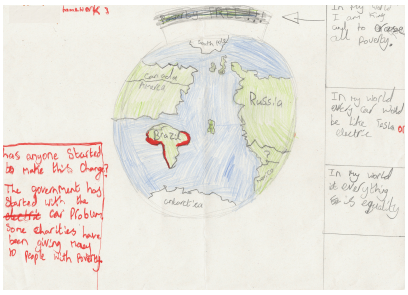
Ideal World - Task 3

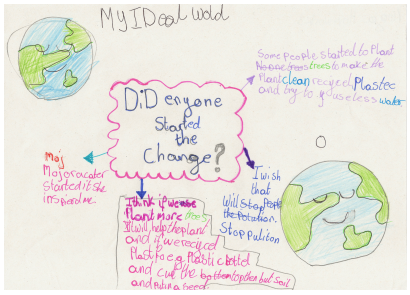
Students were asked to find out if anyone had started working on the changes that were required to transform our real world into their ideal world.

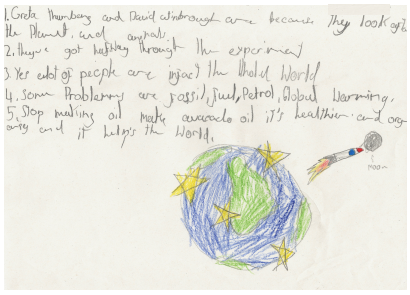
A small selection of their work:



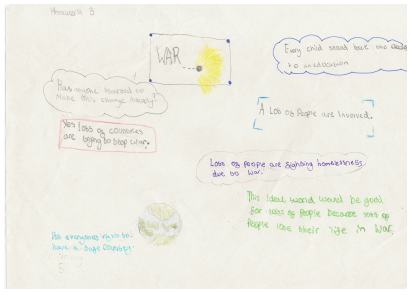


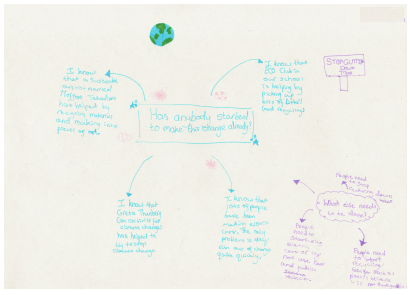






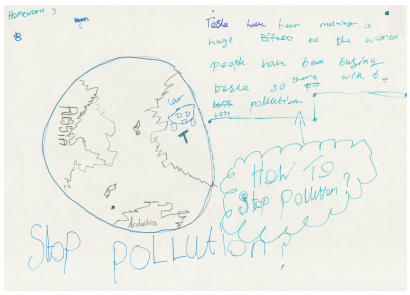


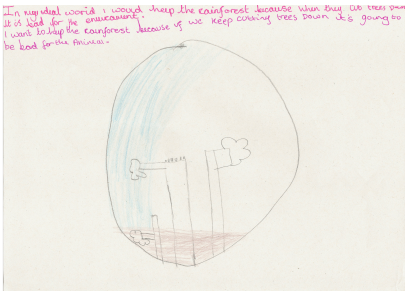


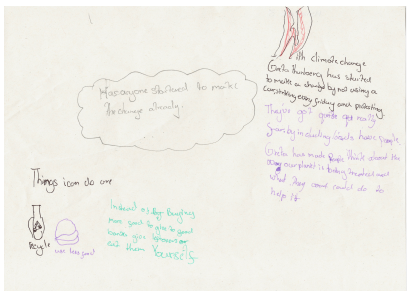


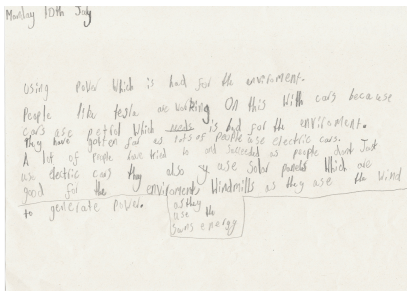


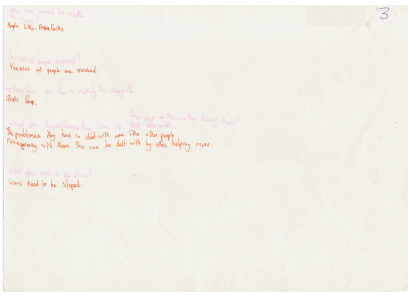


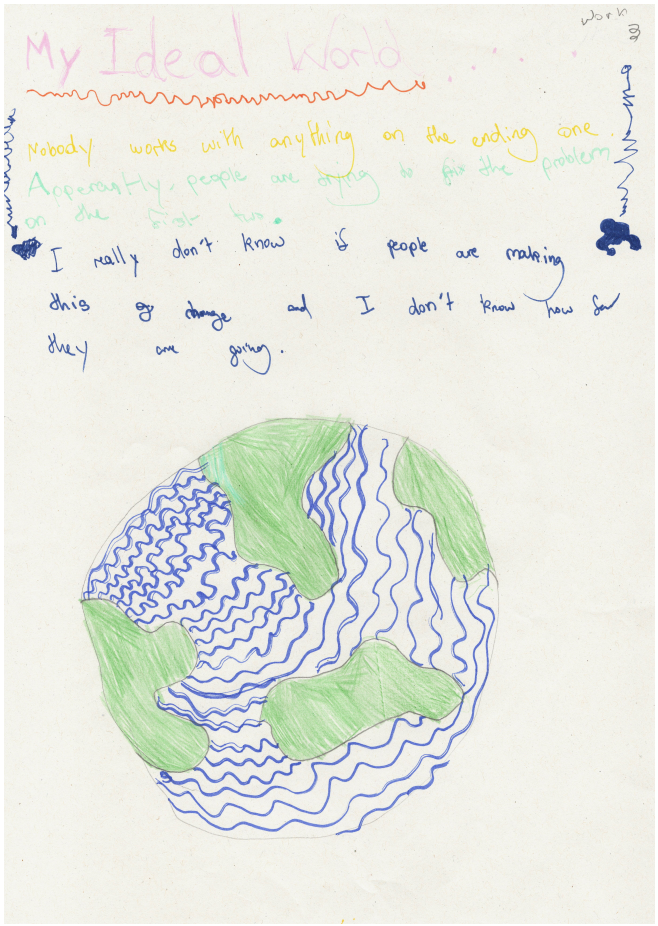












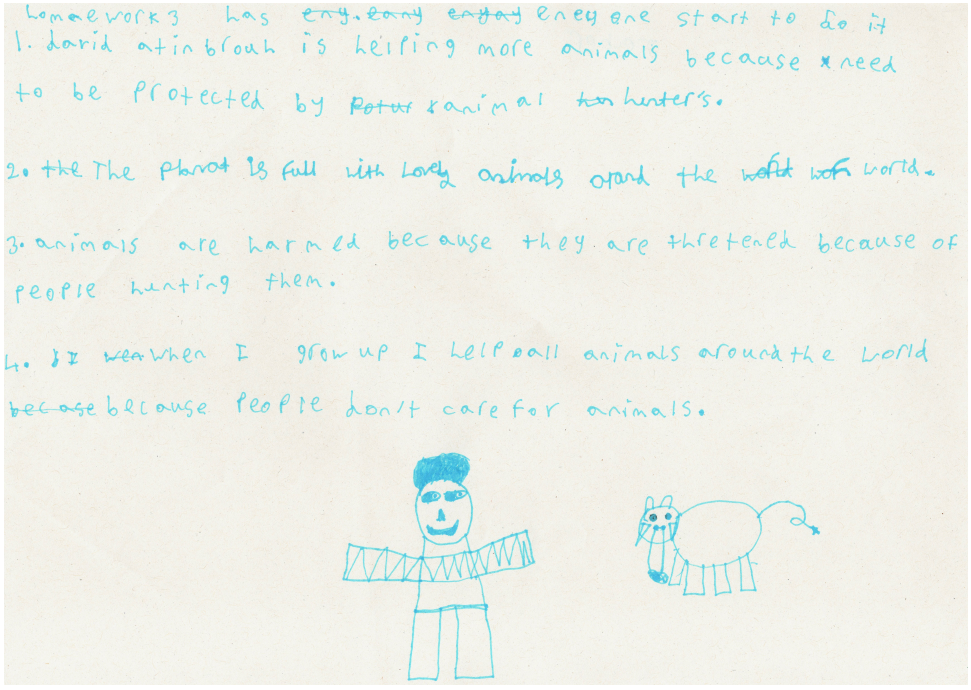
Limitations

The objective of this assignment was to give students an opportunity to research ongoing efforts addressing the issues they had expressed concerns about. The intention was to emphasise that many individuals are actively contributing to positive changes in the world.

However, the examples provided indicate that achieving this goal was challenging within the allotted time frame for the task.

The first student states, "I really don't know if people are making this change and I don't know how far they are going."

The second student mentions David Attenborough, which is likely because he was introduced in a previous session. Any references to specific individuals were individuals introduced in earlier tasks. This suggests that the students may not have had the opportunity to conduct independent research, hindering their ability to discover individuals dedicated to effecting positive change.



Consequently, it appears that students dedicated more time to contemplating the challenges we confront rather than acknowledging the encouraging reality that numerous people are actively striving to make a difference.

This may have played a role in students answering more negatively in the second questionnaire.

"1.David Attenborough is helping more animals because they need to be protected by animal hunters.

2. The planet is full with lovely animals around the world.

3. Animals are harmed because they are threatened because of people hunting them.

4. When I grow up I help all animals around the world because people don't care for animals."

(Second image)

Positive Figures Poster Task

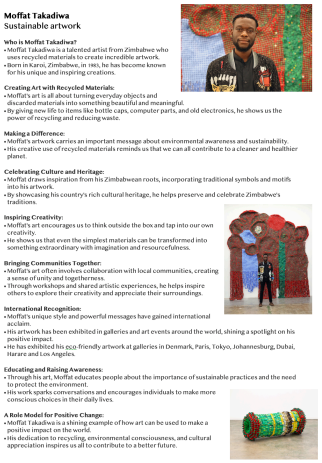
General notes on the session

This was the first session with the class. Despite the teacher's absence due to being called out of class, the students behaved very well and expressed interest in the activity. Although the teacher had assigned predetermined groups, it was decided that students would be able to move freely around the room and there were no difficulties. All the students exhibited keen interest and active engagement throughout the session.

The students demonstrated openness in their interactions with me, the researcher, and even those who initially appeared reserved exhibited confidence as they actively participated in discussions, engaged in conversation with me, and provided feedback at the end of the session.

When it was time for students to share their feedback, there was an overwhelming response, and unfortunately, time constraints prevented everyone from contributing. Virtually all the children expressed their eagerness to discuss what they had learned, and those who had the opportunity provided thoughtful and insightful responses. Upon further questioning, they demonstrated a careful understanding of the material and articulated their own perspectives, indicating a thorough engagement with the content.

Students openly expressed their enjoyment of the task and exhibited genuine excitement for the forthcoming sessions. The class even collectively voted on their preferred activity for the next session, underscoring their enthusiasm and active involvement in the research activities.



Poster examples

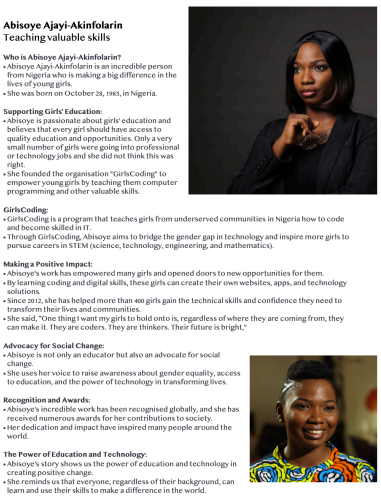


Conversations illustrating the significance of representation

1. During specific interactions, **the crucial role of representation** was highlighted. For instance, one student spontaneously engaged in an enthusiastic conversation about a particular poster featuring Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin. Her excitement stemmed from the realization that Ajayi-Akinfolarin was "from the same place as me". The student said that she realised this from her name and proceeded to explain how to pronounce 'Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin' correctly. This engagement held particular significance as the student had previously exhibited a limited interest in the activities, emphasising the profound impact of representation on her enthusiasm.
2. Similarly, another student initiated an unprompted conversation, calling attention to the extensive presence of women on the posters, with specific reference to 'Queen Nanny Of The Maroons.' This student expressed that she was pleased about the significant representation of women as she felt it accentuated the strength and importance of women.

"She's from the same place as me!"

- Student speaking about Abisoye Ajayi-Akinfolarin



"This was my favourite activity because when you have not seen the person before you think it's amazing what they did"

"This was my favourite activity because we can learn about new people."

— Feedback from students

YouTube task

A small selection of the worksheets made by students:

Team Trees and Team Seas

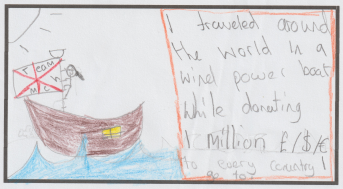
What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: Team MCH

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

M C H Stands for Money for Charity- that finally we can visit every continent.

Team Trees and Team Seas

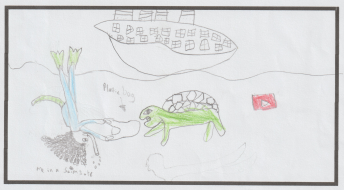
What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: # Clean the Seas

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

I would help the turtles by deep sea diving for plastic. In the different seas or by one with a group of experienced divers, I would start from the smallest ocean to the biggest.

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title:

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

I am going diving to collect ~~rubbish~~ rubbish and ~~burning~~ rubbish into a beautiful creations!!!

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: Team bees

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

I will be helping the bees and plant more flower and help the bees

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: I made 10,000 solar panels

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

Today I made 10,000 solar panels to help the world.

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: I'm Giving away cyber truck's for FREE.

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

I'm giving free cyber trucks so there's more electric cars and no petrol to save the environment.

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: Helping all people in hospitals with a specific medication

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

Today, I'm going to create a healing medication to help at least 10 million people in hospitals. I'm doing this because I believe that all people should be able to live their life peacefully and happily. :)

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: I helped repopulated endanged animal in brazil rainforest

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:



Caption:

Team Trees and Team Seas

What would you do?

If you were given the opportunity to do something similar, what would you choose to do and why?

Task: Design a plan for your mission!

Title: Paying for everyone's health things.

Design a thumbnail for your YouTube video:

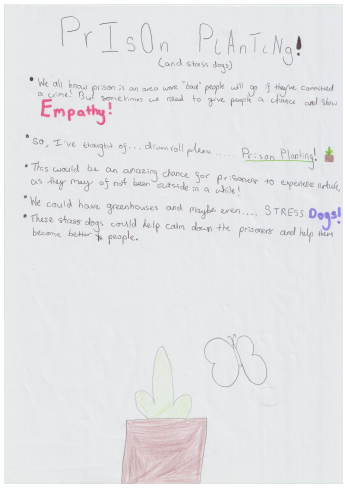


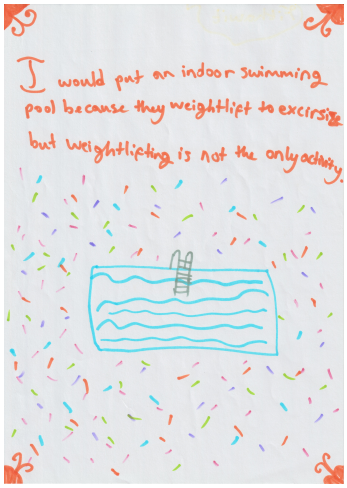
Caption:

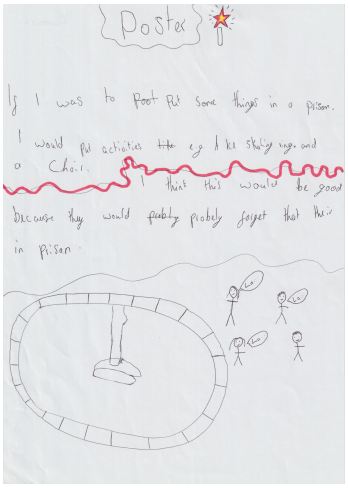
Health is very important to everyone, and I think it should get it for free.

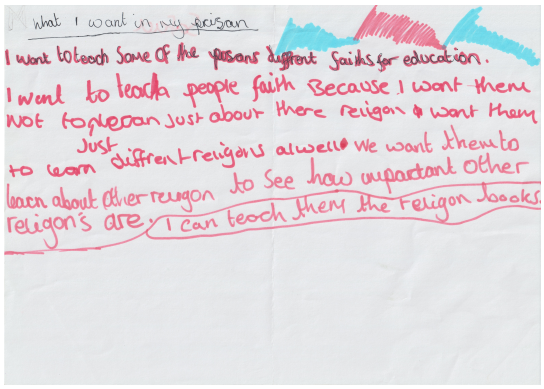
‘Freedom Reads’ Task - What would you put into a prison to give someone a second chance?

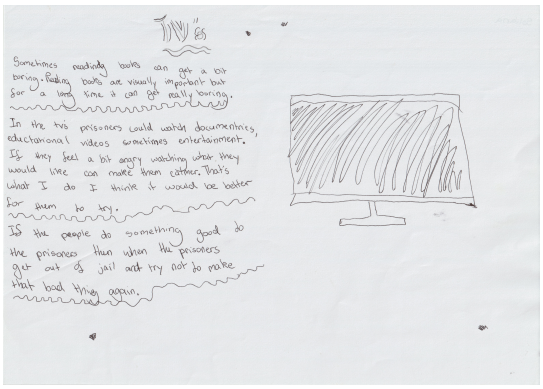
A small selection of the student's ideas and pictures:

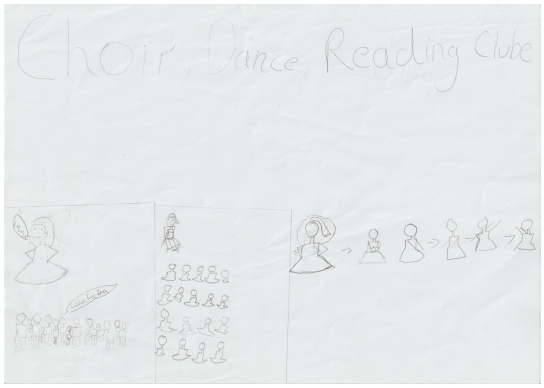


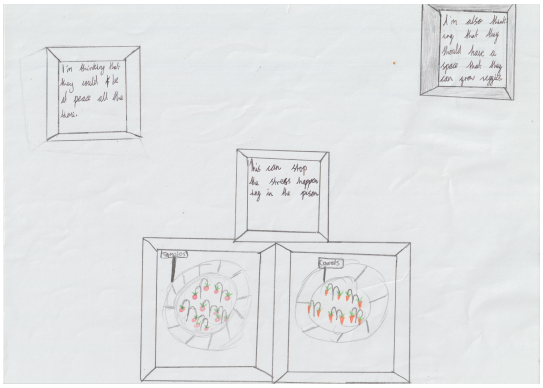


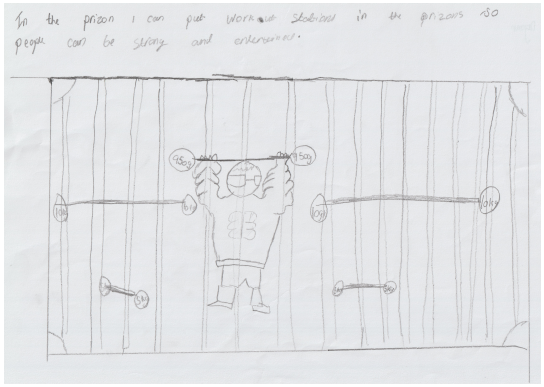


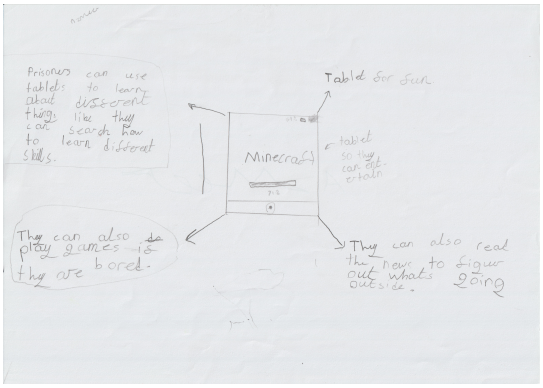


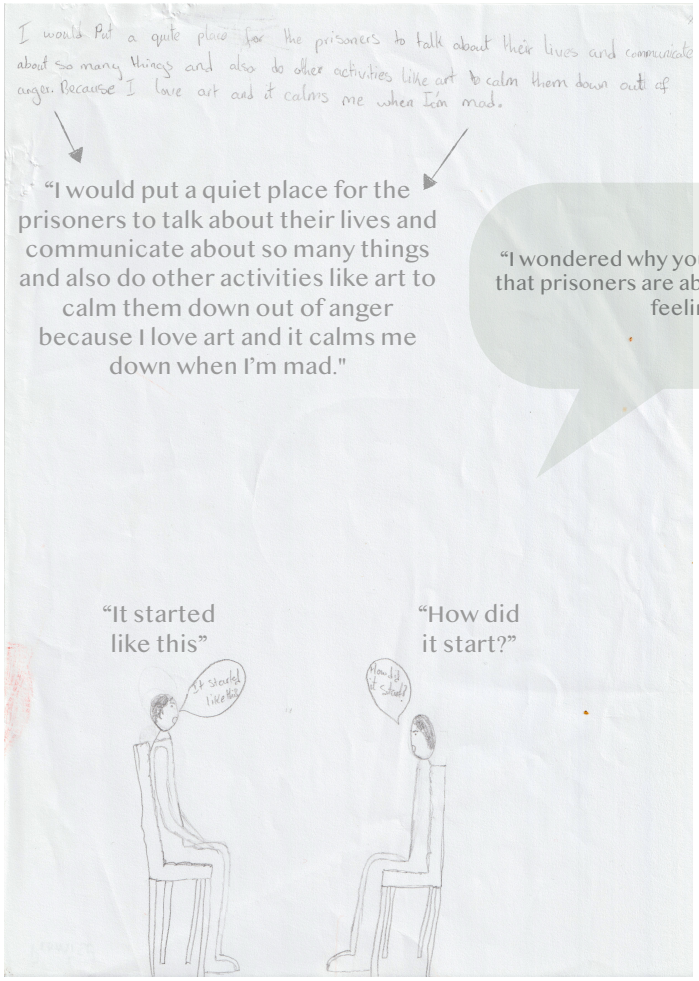












Interview segment - student explains their idea

"I wondered why you feel it is important that prisoners are able to talk about their feelings?"

Interview B

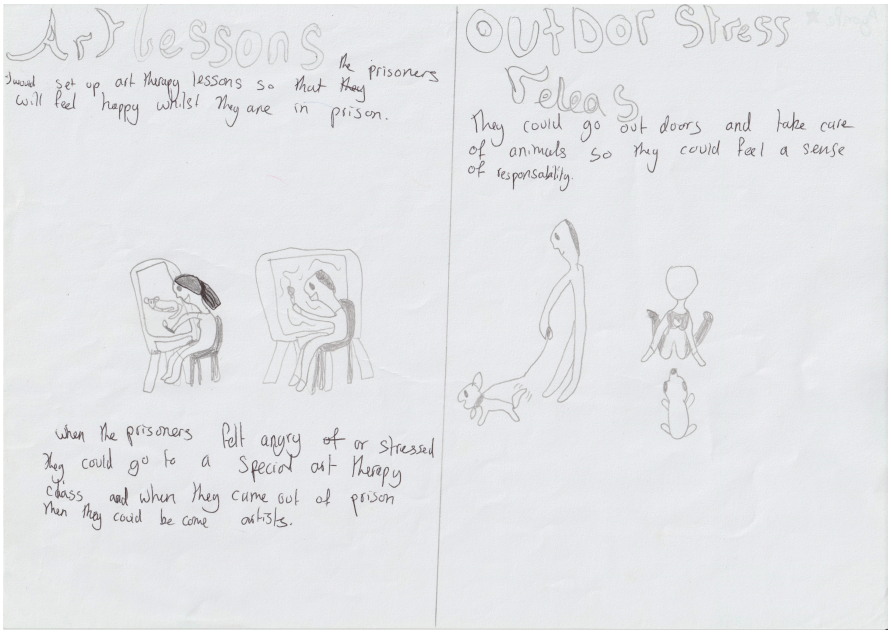
"Well, um, I chose that because sometimes you don't want to read a book and sometimes you feel like you want to talk to someone, so I was thinking about people who can talk about their feelings as a way to feel better. Sometimes when you're angry it helps when you talk to somebody. Like, sometimes when I'm feeling unconfident about something, since my parents always go to work so I'm home alone, I use my iPad. I have WhatsApp and so I call my cousin. She knows all about this. So I go and talk to her about my feelings and then she gives me advice and stuff like that. So then I talk to her and she helps me so that I can express myself because I don't like to talk to people sometimes. I usually go and talk to her a lot of the time. When she's not there, I talk to my Auntie."

"This activity was my favourite because it can be helpful for others and make prisoners more able to have a better life, which I think is important." — Feedback from a student

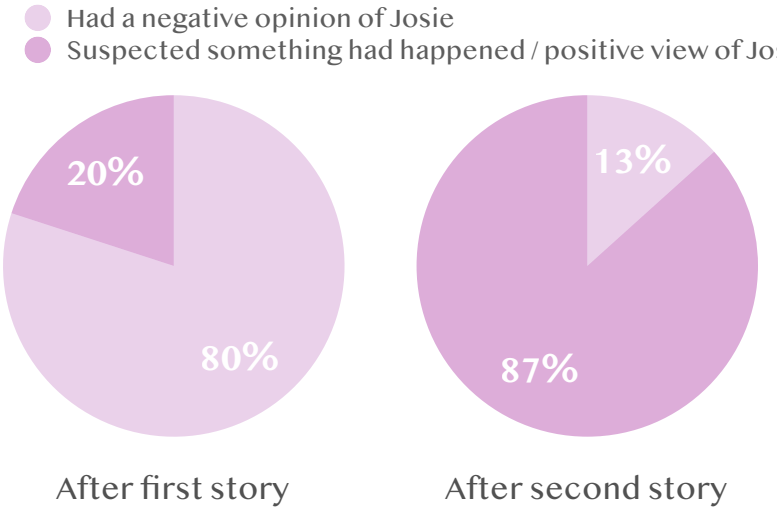
Art Lessons
"I would set up art therapy lessons so that they will feel happy whilst they are in prison. When the prisoners felt angry or stressed they could go to a special art therapy class and when they come out of prison then they could become artists."

Outdoor Stress Release
"They could go outdoors and take care of animals so they could feel a sense of responsibility."

(Right)



Josie's Morning Activity - Empathy Building



"This was my favourite activity because it was fun."

"Reading Josie's story was my favourite activity because I like reading about different people and figuring out about their actual story."

"This was my favourite because I could relate to what Josie felt."

— Feedback from students

Conversations with students

One student ultimately showed considerable enthusiasm for the task which was not expected given she had not initially seemed interested in getting involved; she came into class after getting into trouble during break time. After reading through the first story, she said that she related to Josie and that her previous week had also been full of bad days like the character's. During the discussion, another student suggested that he felt it would be best for Josie to explain to others what had been going on so that they could be understanding towards her. He explained that he often has these days too. The first student responded by saying that it was not always as simple as explaining how your day had been. She said that sometimes "you are just not in a mood where you feel able to explain because sometimes you are overwhelmed and angry and it all becomes too much". She spoke about the fact that she disliked being an only child as she does not like being alone all the time.

Another student immediately assumed that something else must've happened for Josie to behave the way she did. She spoke about how chaotic her own home could be at times, explaining that she had a big family and this included a new baby sibling. She said that her mum often didn't have time to make her breakfast as she was so busy. She said that she could also relate to how Josie felt.

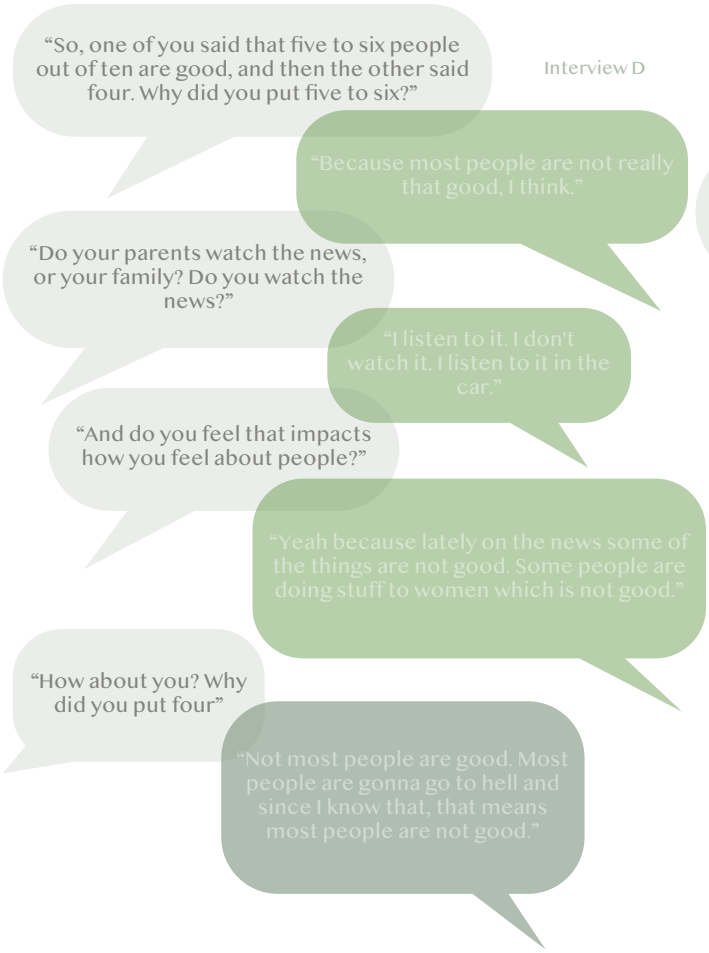
Student comments

- "I think she is rude but I think there might be a good reason that she was like that."
- "I think she is stressed because she had to be acting like this for a reason."
- "I have behaved like Josie before because my teacher thought I was talking, but I wasn't and I got into trouble."
- "I think she's lonely and upset, so she let her anger out on everyone else."
- "I think Josie was just unlucky."
- "She doesn't get listened to. She gets all the blame."
- "She was angry because no one understood her."

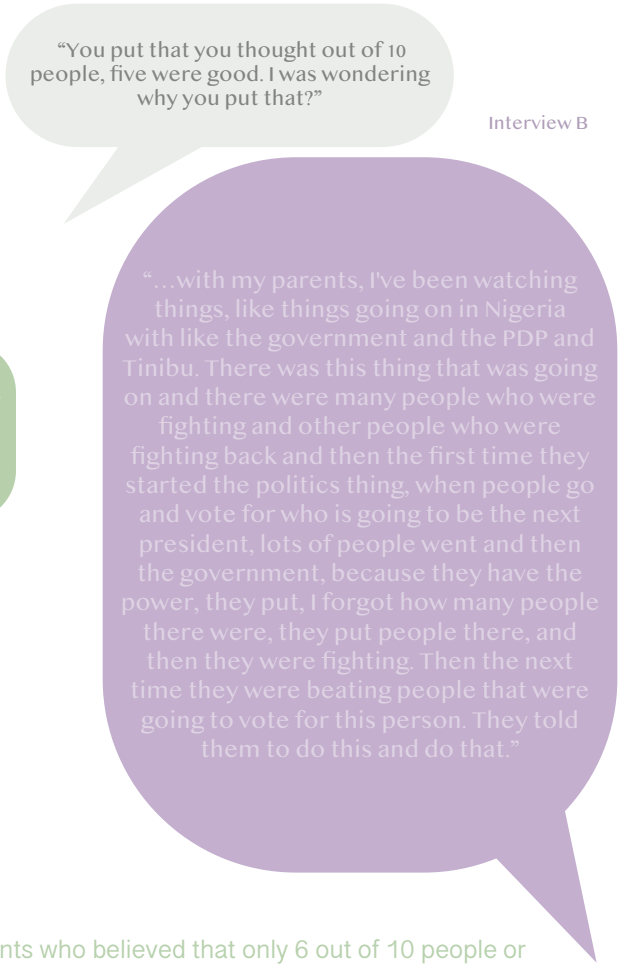
Interview segments

Section 1: Speaking to students who had stated that out of 10, 6 or fewer people were good.

Example 1



Example 2



Example 1 and Example 2

Both Example 1 and Example 2 show instances where students who believed that only 6 out of 10 people or fewer were good appeared to be involved in news consumption, and it appears their awareness of global issues significantly influenced their overall perceptions of humanity.

When questioned about whether their classroom experiences had influenced their viewpoints, these students stated that the gravity of the problems they were informed about rendered the classroom discussions insufficient to change their perspectives. This lack of transformation isn't unexpected, considering that the students only took part in a very limited number of brief sessions and both students seem to be aware of serious issues. The student in Example 2, despite her age, demonstrated remarkable awareness of the challenging political landscape in Nigeria. She also spoke from her personal experiences, shedding light on additional hardships in Nigeria related to education, religion, and resource scarcity.

In addition, in Example 1 there is an apparent correlation between negative ideas about human nature and the participant's religious beliefs. However, this correlation did not manifest itself in any other instances. Investigating the link between religion and perspectives on human nature could be interesting, but unfortunately, there was insufficient time to delve into this aspect here.



Example 3

In Example 3, as seen in Example 4 below, the student has pointed to concerns, particularly about the environment, as the reason for thinking that less than half of people are good. While remaining relatively low, the student does say that she has increased her number to five. She says that she has changed her mind after looking at people who are doing good things in the world, specifically Jane Goodall.



Example 4

By emphasising the positive actions of individuals, it naturally brought to light certain challenges in the world, many of which stem from human activities. While the examination of these individuals served as a source of inspiration, it also seemed to accentuate some of the concerns, particularly related to environmental issues, that students had voiced from the outset.

In Example 4, a student explains that they initially felt that ten out of ten people were good but now feel that only five are. This was an unexpected result as an effort had been made to avoid focus on the problems themselves and human involvement, but it was clear that many students were already concerned about issues such as climate change and the focus on positive change, such as clearing litter in the oceans, inevitably highlighted the severity of the issues.

Section 2: Why do we do bad things? Is it harder to be good?

Example 1



Example 1

In Example 1, the student conveys the notion that refraining from engaging in negative behaviour is challenging. Unlike in Example 2, where emotional instability was the key factor, in this case, the difficulty arises from the temptation associated with such actions.

This could suggest that her views on human nature involve a belief that humans are inclined to be tempted by "bad" actions and that resisting these temptations can be challenging. It doesn't necessarily indicate that she views humans as inherently bad, but rather that they may have a tendency to engage in negative behaviour when faced with such dilemmas.

Example 2



Example 2

In Example 2, the student articulates the viewpoint that engaging in 'negative' actions feels easier than choosing 'good' actions, contingent upon one's emotional state. According to her perspective, it becomes simple to engage in activities one would typically avoid when calm, when experiencing anger. She explains that telling lies is far easier than facing the repercussions of one's actions. She does not express the view that people are inherently bad, but does believe that avoiding bad things can be difficult given our emotional nature.

Example 3

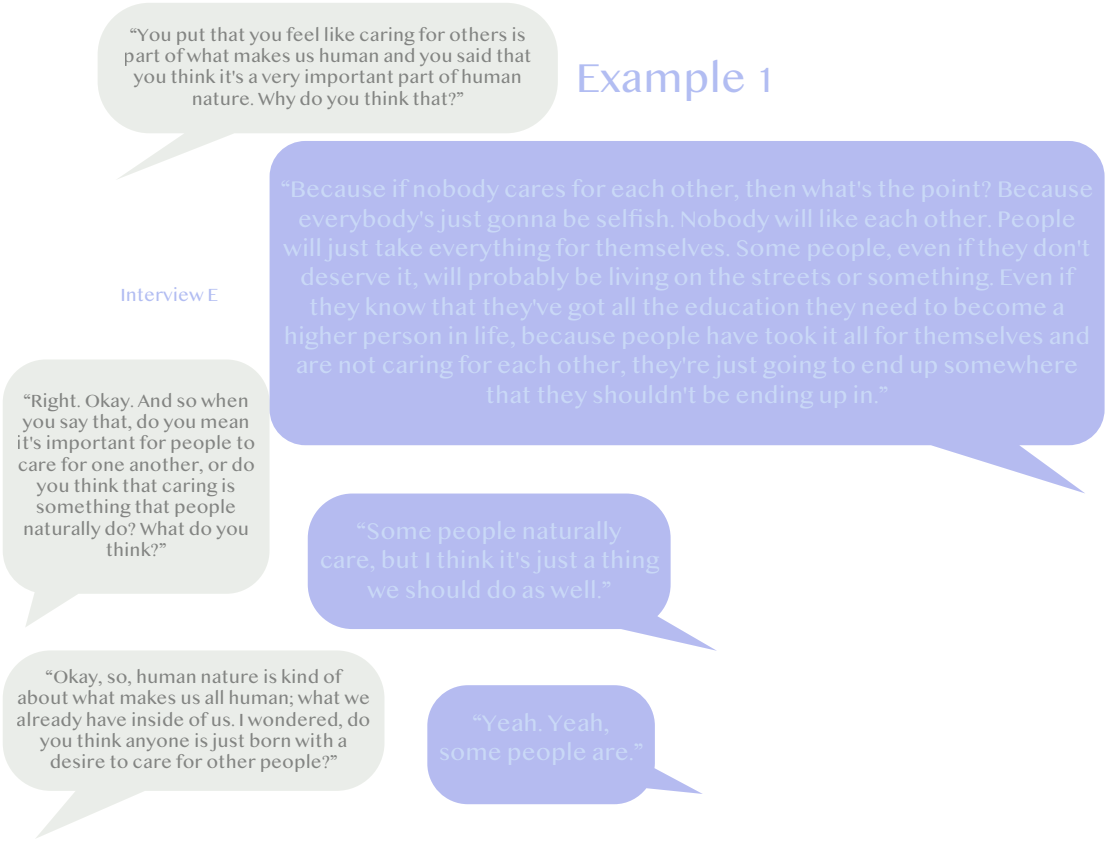


Example 3

In Example 3, the first student felt that being nice to everyone would be required to be deemed a 'good person' and they felt this would be difficult, especially if that person had been unpleasant towards you. She expresses that even though being nice to that person would only be a little bit of effort, it is still easier to be bad. This gives the impression that she feels it does not require effort to be bad, and therefore, she potentially feels people are more disposed to be bad.

The second student agrees but stresses that being good requires sacrifices as considering other people requires this.

Section 3: Human nature and caring for one another



Example 1

In Example 1, the student conveys the notion that life would lose its purpose if people didn't care about each other. This statement suggests that the student values the importance of interpersonal connections and caring for others in defining the purpose and meaning of life. It implies that, in their perspective, the foundation of a meaningful existence lies in the mutual care and consideration that people have for one another. It reflects a belief in the significance of compassion, empathy, and social bonds as fundamental to a meaningful and fulfilling life.

There appears to be an element that reflects the concept of "meritocracy" as well, suggesting that individuals with a certain level of education deserve specific positions. However, here, this point doesn't carry a negative connotation. Instead, it seems the student is emphasising that regardless of how hard a person works, if others are selfish, and “take everything for themselves", no one can else can succeed.

Example 2

The first student articulates the view that caring for others is an inherent aspect of human nature, grounded in the essential need for mutual support among humans. She implies that humans naturally depend on one another, thus underscoring the notion that caring for one another is an intrinsic part of our nature. This perspective aligns with concepts discussed in the paper titled 'Two Key Steps in the Evolution of Human Cooperation: The Interdependence Hypothesis' by Tomasello et al. (2012).

Moreover, the student suggests when stating, 'it’s just like a thing we do every day’, that caring for one another is a customary behaviour embedded in our daily lives, seemingly suggesting that prosocial conduct is a natural disposition.



The second student conveys a similar perspective. She speaks of her mother's habit of being kind to people she encounters, highlighting how this behaviour leads to the formation of friendships—a clear example of the mutually beneficial aspect of caring for one another. This notion mirrors the central theme explored in the aforementioned paper, which posits that human evolution is marked by cooperation and interdependence, with caring for one another playing a pivotal role in this context.

Example 3



Example 3

In Example 3, the student expresses skepticism regarding the inherent presence of altruism within human nature, citing her observation that many people do not seem exhibit concern for others. When queried about the potential influence of in-class activities on her perspective, she did concede that the study's exposure to certain individuals had inspired a more positive outlook. This positivity, however, was unable to negate the overarching doubt she felt. While disappointing, this result was probable given the limited time-frame available for the activities.

Section 4: Morality, responsibility and self-efficacy

Example 1



Example 1

In this instance, the student's primary goals which do not concern wanting to make a difference, remain unchanged; however, she now acknowledges a sense of responsibility toward 'changing the world'. She speculates that perhaps people, in general, share this responsibility and expresses her willingness to amend her initial response accordingly.

Additionally, she affirms her desire to contribute positively to the world. Notably, without any prompting, she asserts her belief in her capacity to effect change in the world—an indication of self-efficacy. This is an encouraging point, as prosocial self-efficacy has been shown to serve as a mediating factor through which the belief in altruistic human nature positively fosters prosocial behaviour (see literature review). She attributes this newfound confidence to the inspiration drawn from observing individuals engaged in benevolent acts and reflecting on her own efforts.

The student also expresses a genuine enthusiasm for the activities she has engaged in as part of the research and a desire to participate in more of them. She also agrees on the value of extending this research to other schools.

Section 5: Students expressed that they had found looking at positive figures inspiring.

Example 1



Example 1

In Example 1, the student conveys that observing positive individuals engaged in benevolent actions enhances her own perceived capability to engage in similar acts of kindness, reflecting an increase in prosocial self-efficacy.

This concept aligns with the findings of Enright and Yao's study, as discussed in the literature review. Enright and Yao's research underscores the interconnectedness of prosocial self-efficacy and prosocial attitudes, highlighting how they serve as mediating factors through which the belief in altruistic human nature positively influences subsequent prosocial behaviours.

Example 2



Example 2

The first student exemplifies the essence of this research, which aims to ascertain if exposure to individuals making positive changes can cultivate an attitude where one desires to contribute to positive change as well. However, the research originally sought to reveal not only the development of such attitudes but also their alignment with observable behaviours. While the limited time frame prevented any substantial, measurable, or conspicuous changes in the behaviour of the children, the current findings do suggest the potential for such alignment.

The second student credits one of the activities with fostering a greater empathetic consideration for others. The fact that she independently recalled and raised this point is highly encouraging. Not only did her input diverge from that of the first student, suggesting her own unique insights, but given that this idea predominantly occurred within a single session suggests that even this short activity made an impact.

The aspiration is that with the consistent reinforcement of such messages over an extended duration, in conjunction with other key concepts explored during the research, these notions would gradually become influential in shaping her behaviour, as well as that of her peers. The heightened empathy she mentions would ideally become a pivotal factor in her interpersonal interactions and responses to others.

Section 6: Some additional feedback from students

Example 1

"Finally, I just wanted to ask whether you enjoyed the stuff we've done in class?"

"Yeah."

"Would it be something you'd like to continue doing, or that you think other schools should do?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"You think it'd be good to do in schools?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"So then other people can make a difference so they can, like, when they're older, try and help the world as well."

Interview A

Example 2

Interview B

"I just wondered whether you enjoyed the activities that we did. Were there any that you enjoyed, any that you didn't enjoy? I won't be offended at all."

"I enjoyed all of it."

Example 3

"Did you enjoy the things that we did in class?"

"I loved it, I want to do more, I want to do more."

"...Do you think it would be something that would be good for different schools to do too?"

Interview C

"Yes."

Section 7: Some additional interesting segments

Example 1

"You put that you only follow rules that you agree with? Why?"

Interview E

"In some countries that I know, especially the country that my parents come from, the rules there are not nice rules. Like, only certain tribes should be able to get what they want and another tribe is just like, 'they didn't deserve anything', so I think that we should only follow rules that we think are actually about caring for others as well, not just for somebody else's way of how they want it to be."

Example 2

Example 2

The student's response was interesting as she assumed that a rich childhood is one that likely lacks compassion, portraying it in a negative light.

"So, you think that sometimes people care about money above everything else. Do you think it's normal for people to care about money above other things?"

Interview E

"It depends on the childhood that they've grown up in because some people might have grown up into a childhood that's really caring and nice, but some people have grown up in, like, a really rich childhood and their parents might just be focused on their work or something. So then that affects the child. It makes them grow up like that, they learn it from their parents."

"Do you feel like a lot of people are the way they are because of the way they've been brought up?"

"Yeah."

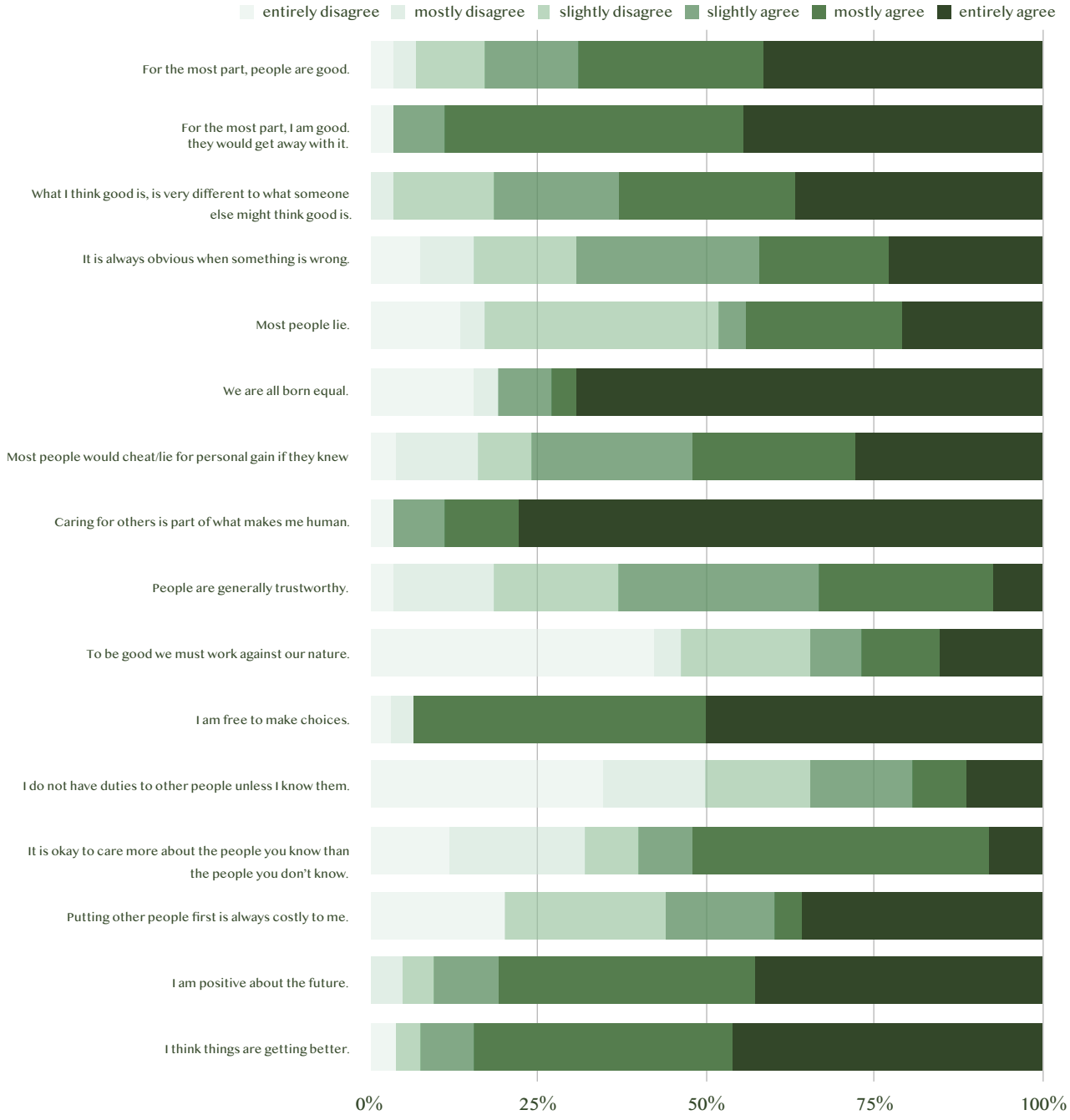
Parent/Carers

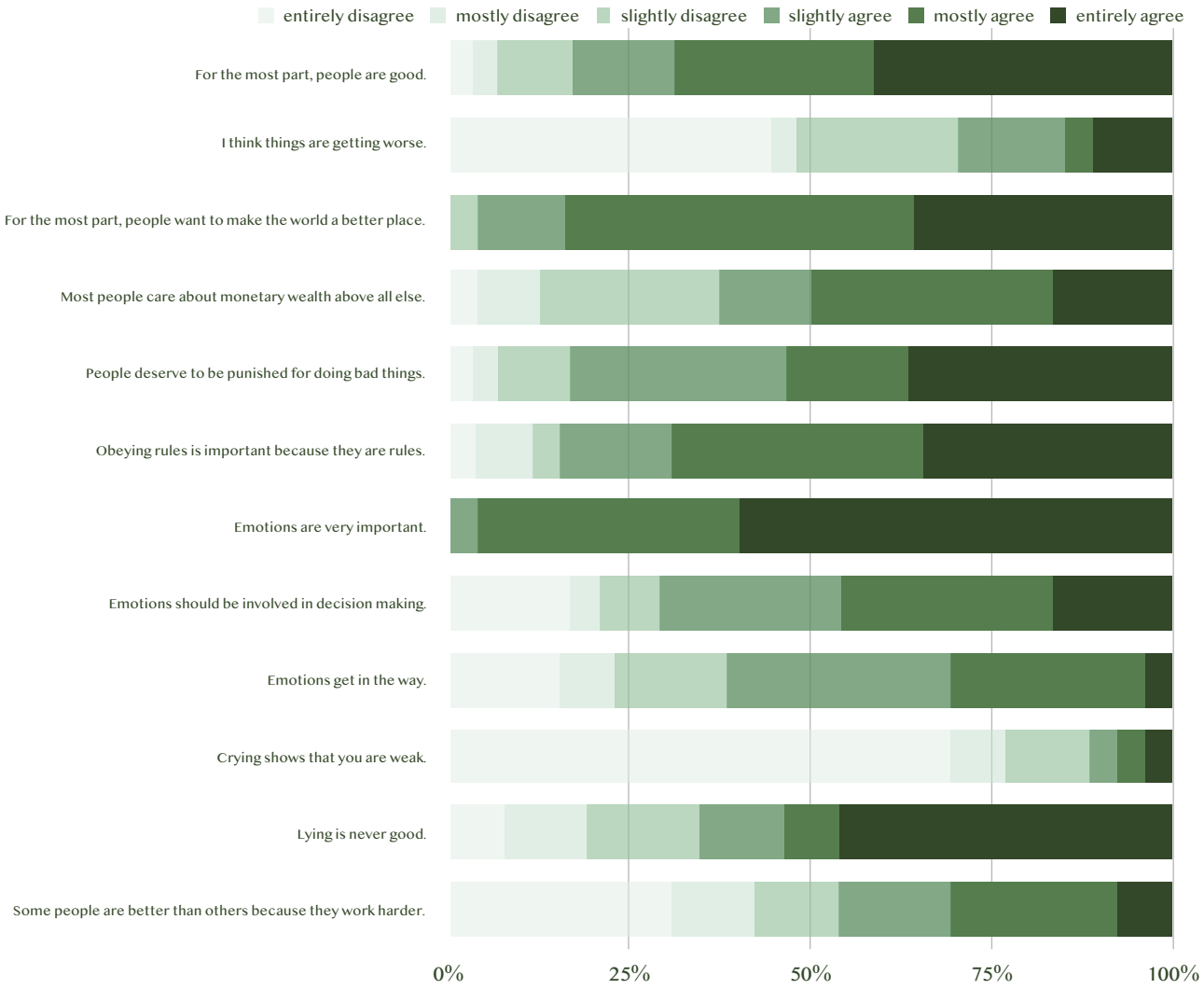
Parents and carers - Questionnaires

Originally, the plan was to employ identical questionnaires for parents and caregivers to assess changes in student behaviour. However, due to time constraints, the questionnaires were adapted to better align with the research's scope. The revised questionnaires focused solely on gathering parent and caregiver perspectives to determine if they were in sync with their children's views.

It's worth noting that there were very few sets of parent and caregiver questionnaires returned by the students; specifically, we received 11 sets of both Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2. Consequently, the sample size is exceptionally small. In this context, the data presented in the charts (Questionnaire 1) represents responses from a total of 17 parents across both the intervention and control groups, with some parents opting to answer only select questions.

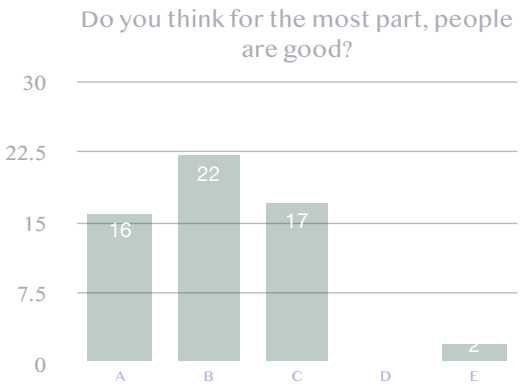
Questionnaire 1 - Personal views





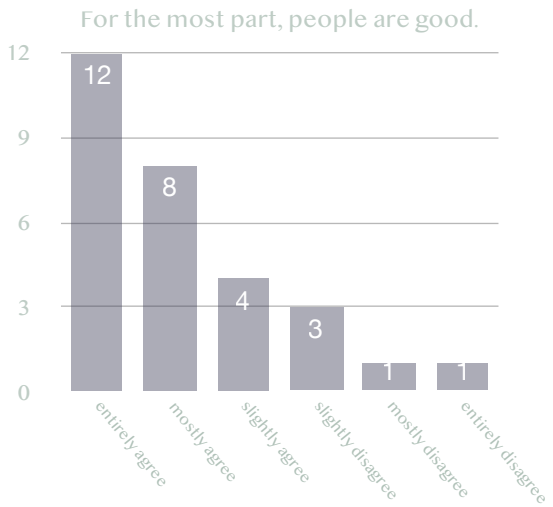
Comparing student and parent/carer answers to similar questions

Student answers

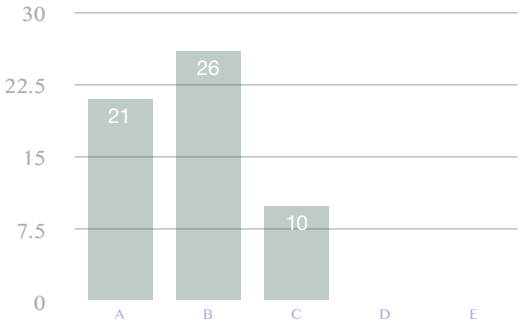


a) Yes, most people are good
b) Kind of, some people are good
c) Kind of, some people are not good
d) No, most people are not good
e) No, most people are bad

Parent/carer Answers

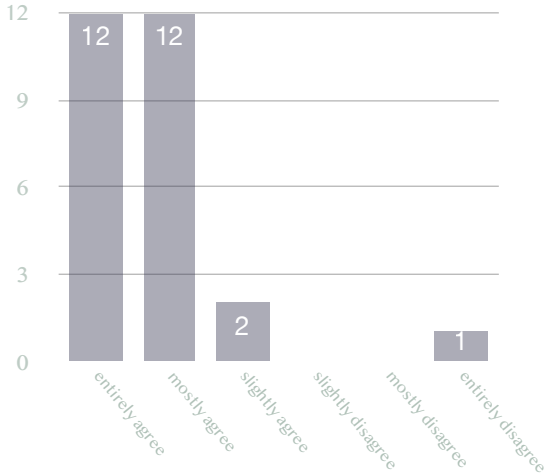


Do you think you are mostly good?

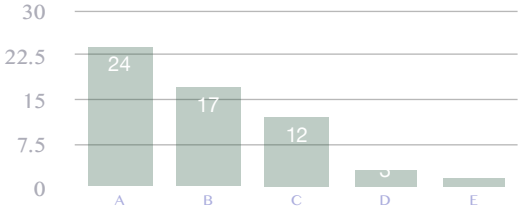


a) Yes, I am mostly good
b) Kind of, I try to be good
c) Kind of, sometimes I am not good
d) No, I am not really good
e) No, I am mostly bad

For the most part, I am good.

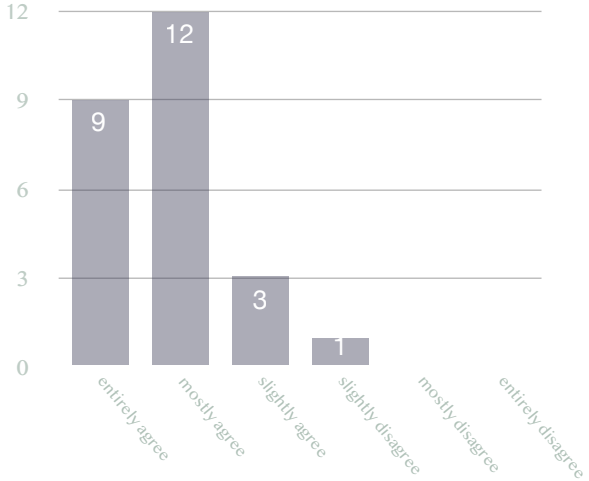


Do you think that most people want to make the world a better place?

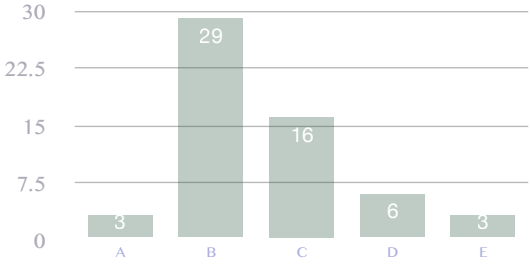


a) Yes, most people want to make the world a better place.
b) I mostly think so
c) Sometimes
d) Not really, most people don't care about making the world better.
e) No, most people do not want to make the world a better place.

For the most part, people want to make the world a better place.

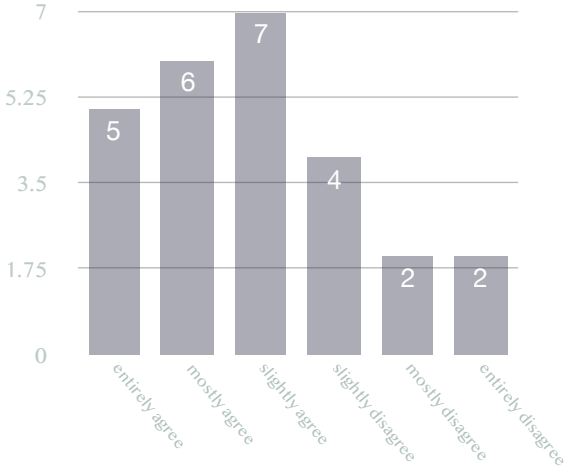


Is it always obvious when something is wrong?

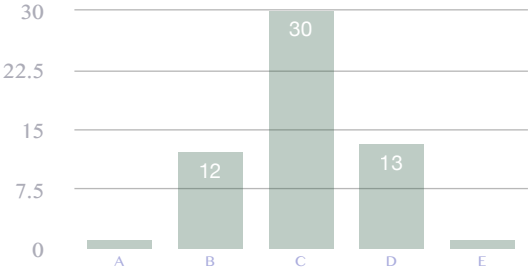


a) Yes, it's always clear when something is wrong
b) Kind of, sometimes it's clear and sometimes it's not
c) Kind of, it depends on the situation
d) No, it's not always obvious when something is wrong
e) No, it is never obvious when something is wrong

It is always obvious when something is wrong.

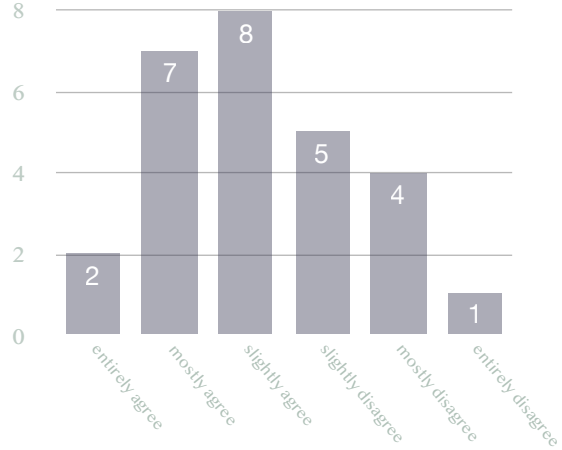


Are most people trustworthy?

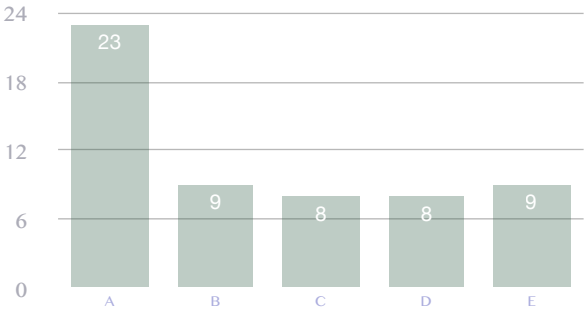


a) Yes, I trust most people
b) Most of the time I trust people
c) Sometimes I trust people
d) I don't trust people very often
e) I almost never trust people

People are generally trustworthy.

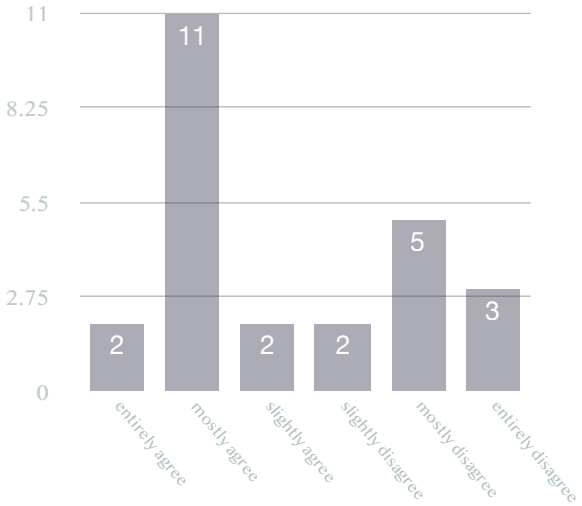


It is okay to care more about the people you know than people you do not know.

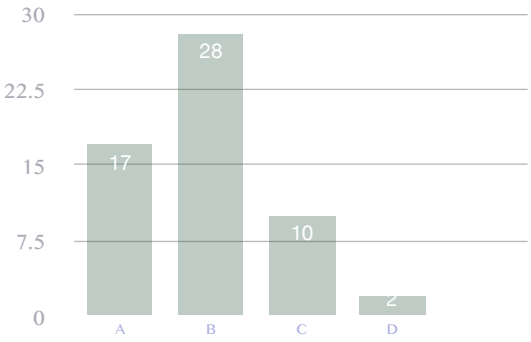


a) Yes, it's okay to care more about people I know.
b) I mostly agree, but there can be exceptions.
c) It depends on the situation.
d) I mostly disagree, I should care about everyone equally.
e) No, I should care about everyone equally.

It is okay to care more about the people you know than people you do not know.

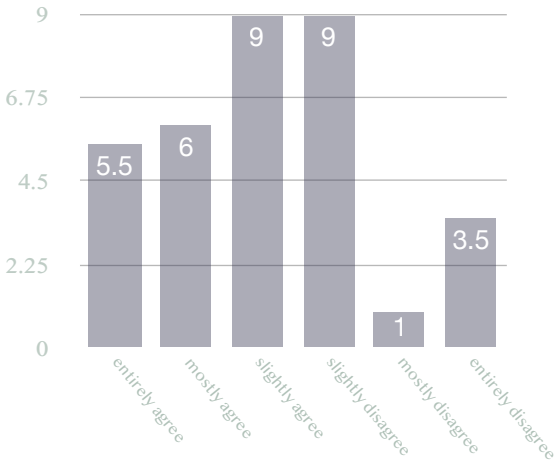


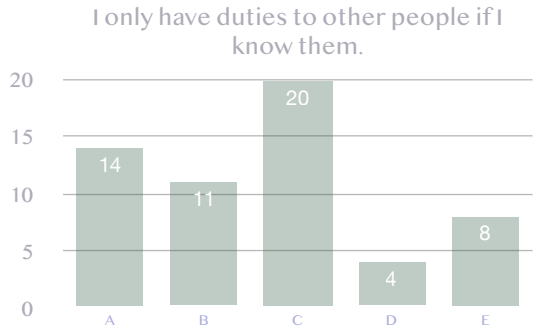
Do you think that most people lie?



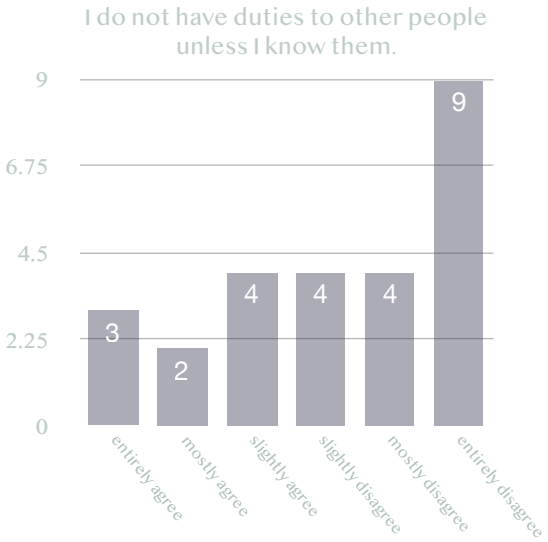
a) Definitely, most people lie
b) Kind of, some people lie
c) Kind of not true, only a few people lie
d) Definitely not, most people don't lie

Most people lie.



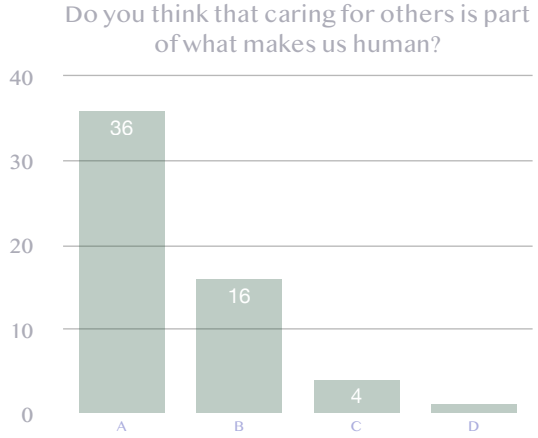


a) Yes, I only have duties to people I know.
b) I mostly agree, but sometimes I still have duties to strangers.
c) It depends on the situation.
d) I mostly disagree, I have duties to most people.
e) No, I have duties to everyone because all humans have duties to each other.

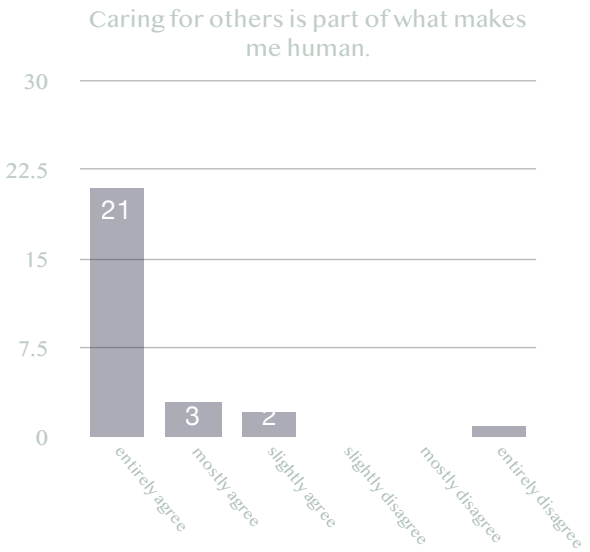


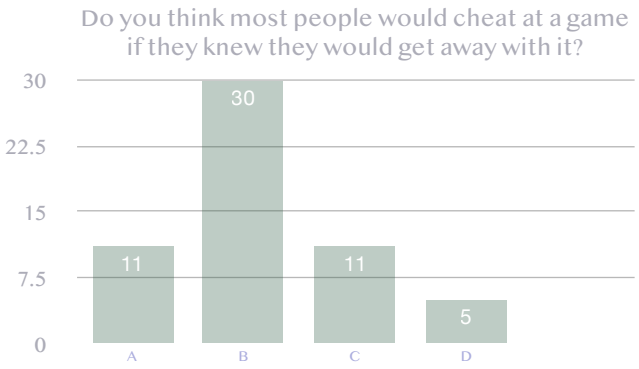
Discussion

Here we see a disparity between answers. Parent/carers were more likely to state that it is not the case that you only have duties to people that you know. This may come from the fact that children are taught, for example, to avoid strangers, or that they may have misunderstood the word 'duty', or that as children they are not really able to have duties to others - the question may have been unsuitable for the age group.

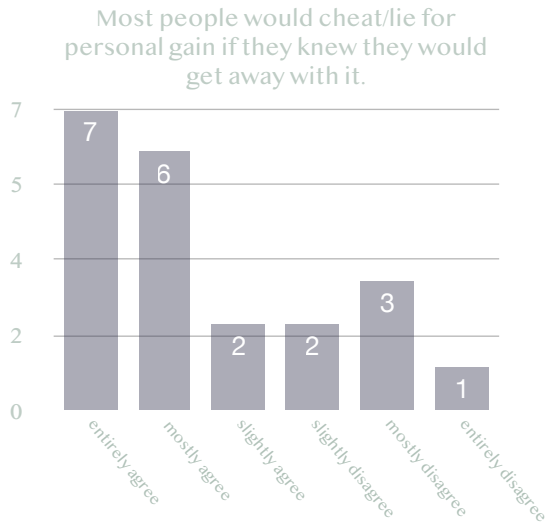


a) Yes, it is a very important part of human nature.
b) It is quite important.
c) I don't think it is a big part of human nature.
d) No, it is not part of human nature.



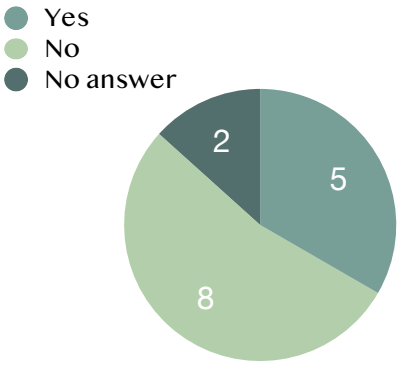


a) Definitely, most people would cheat
b) Kind of, some people would cheat
c) Not really, only a few people would cheat
d) Definitely not, most people would not cheat
e)



Parent/carer feedback

1) Have you noticed a change in your child's behaviour?



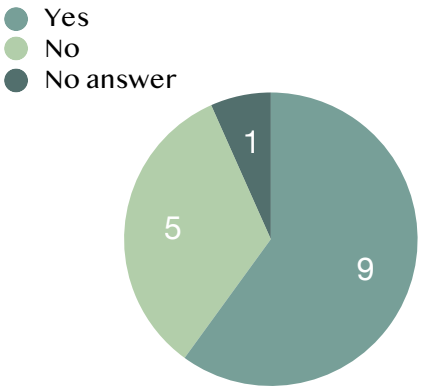
"Yes, I have noticed politeness and positivity."

"Yes I have, by being kind to others."

"She has been spending time outside more."

"She behaves well"

2) Has your child spoken to you about anything regarding the research? If so, please mention what they have said.



"My child has enjoyed participating in the research"

"She was happy to learn that there were libraries in prisons."

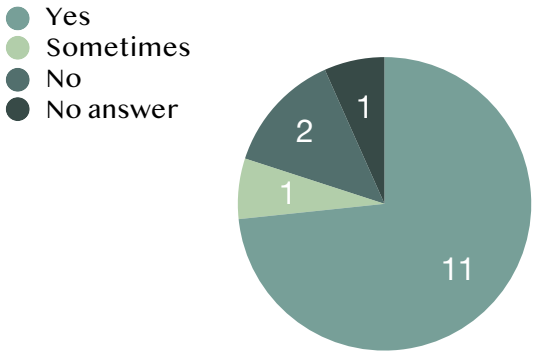
"Yes, she mentions about people doing good things. Caring for people."

"She is eager to complete this questionnaire."

"She said all about how fun it is and learning about good people"

"He said he would do fun stuff of the research."

3) Has your child seemed more positive/optimistic?



4) What are your thoughts about this research?

"My child came home and was excited to tell me that she was taking part in the research. I would like to know the results of the research and how many of the class participated including this questionnaire."

"It sounds very interesting and is very valuable however we discuss these topics already as a family so the twins are used to thinking about these things."

"It was very interesting."

"This research is great. It revolves around caring for people and what life is all about. Making life more easy for people and making people happy."

"I love how the project is all about influential people."

"My son thinks the research was good and enjoyed it though he doesn't talk about it at home."

Further discussion

Limitations

The findings reported in this study should be approached with caution due to a range of issues that have impacted the reliability of the data. Notably, these challenges encompassed the constrained timeframe allocated by the school, where an initially planned 3-4 weeks for data collection was condensed into 7 days. Additionally, the study faced limitations in terms of sample size, which was notably small, affecting the representativeness of the results. Furthermore, issues arose concerning the control group's participation; the second questionnaire was not completed, with the first being finalised only after the research was halfway completed. Another pertinent issue pertains to the extent of research conducted without the direct presence of the researcher. During this phase, teachers assumed responsibility for some aspects of data collection and material presentation, while simultaneously managing their demanding end-of-term obligations. This in part rendered it challenging to maintain consistent communication and oversight.

As a collective result of these factors, the data's reliability has been greatly compromised, thereby limiting the capacity to draw definitive conclusions or generalise findings based on this dataset. It is probable that these findings may not accurately reflect the full potential of this work.

Consequently, these results should not dissuade or discourage the pursuit of future studies, as the endeavour in question exhibits substantial promise. This promise is particularly evident in the qualitative data that was gathered within the constraints of the abbreviated research period.

Returning to the Literature

The literature referenced in the introduction sheds light on the intricate connection between optimistic beliefs about human nature, particularly the belief in innate human altruism, and the profound influence of these convictions on an individual's personal prosocial attitudes and, by extension, their corresponding behaviours. This research set out to test means of cultivating prosocial behaviour within an educational context designed to nurture these attitudes and beliefs.

While 11 out of 15 parents reported that their children appeared more positive and optimistic, the study fell short of fully demonstrating the potential of these efforts, with only 5 out of 15 reporting a change in the behaviour of their children. Regrettably, the limitations imposed by the sample size, timeframe, and the absence of a control group hampered the precision and any possible generalisability of the findings. Consequently, this research alone cannot conclusively unveil the true extent of these methods and pathways for fostering prosocial self-efficacy and behavioural inclinations.

However, concerning the original research objectives, this small-scale inquiry did yield valuable insights. Although not universally applicable, it hinted at promising avenues that warrant further investigation. Notably, the study underlined the pivotal role played by representation and diversity in educational resources, which significantly impacted student enthusiasm and engagement.

As anticipated, the study also suggested that exposure to negative news influences students' perceptions of others and human nature, diminishing their propensity to adopt optimistic outlooks through the research interventions.

Conversations with select students further illuminated that learning about individuals who contribute positively to society can be inspirational, fostering a sense of self-efficacy even in children who stressed their awareness of the severity of challenges we face. Similarly, the discovery that others are effecting positive change appeared to kindle a sense of hopefulness in some children, igniting positive aspirations and, in some instances, a heightened sense of responsibility to make a difference.

This implies that the realisation that others are actively engaged in bettering the world may instil a sense of duty and responsibility among individuals to join these collective efforts, even if this wasn't an initial aspiration or intent. It suggests that the actions of others can motivate individuals to become part of a collective striving for change, once a picture of such a collective has been painted. Consequently, promoting awareness of these positive endeavours could serve as a catalyst for nurturing this sense of responsibility and duty, ultimately fostering prosocial behaviour.

Practically speaking, emphasising the existence of individuals who are making a positive impact may be an effective approach to inspire positive actions. Continually highlighting the lack of participation or assistance from others might, in many cases, perpetuate this reality. It might be that focusing on positive actions is the key to propelling further positive contributions. As one child stated in an interview, "...sometimes people think that 'not many people are helping the earth, so why should I do it?' but then once you actually learn about how millions of people are actually trying to help, it feels like you want to be part of it."

An additional result of significance

It is impossible to overlook the resounding reality of the profound levels of concern and anxiety harboured by children in relation to the environment and climate change, which was fiercely emphasised through this research. Results relentlessly revealed their persistent and genuine apprehension about the state of the world and its future.

Future Directions

In future studies, several key considerations should be addressed.

First, incorporating a control group is essential, as its absence significantly hindered the reliability of the results. Secondly, adequate time allocation is essential to fully realise the research's potential. Furthermore, improved communication with parents would be beneficial to enhance their understanding of the research and encourage greater participation. Although enlarging the sample size was not feasible for this research, it is advisable for future studies to strive for a significantly larger sample size to enable meaningful generalisation of the results.To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the potential outcomes, involving a diverse range of schools would also be necessary.

Importantly, it would also be beneficial to investigate schools where the themes explored within this study are not as deeply integrated into the educational framework. The school that participated in this research stands apart from most because it already places a strong emphasis on many of these subjects. Consequently, although the research activities represented a departure from the students' typical learning experiences, they did not delve into entirely unfamiliar territory. Exploring schools with less emphasis on these themes might yield more pronounced changes in student beliefs and aspirations.

It would also be interesting to analyse how individuals from various age groups respond to the specific focus that has been emphasised in this research. Understanding these responses has the potential to shape the development of methods and strategies aimed at fostering greater prosocial behaviour and attitudes among different age groups.

Potential implications and applications

Future directions include the development of activity resources with the aim of integrating these ideas into educational curricula to promote prosocial behaviour, attitudes and aspirations in young people.

Conclusion

This research aimed not only to explore the intricate interplay between children's altruistic beliefs and their engagement in prosocial behaviour but also to encourage the latter by presenting a positive narrative surrounding human beings and our nature. Despite the challenges faced during implementation, the study reveals valuable insights into the potential for nurturing prosocial values within educational contexts. The resources developed show promise, especially when paying attention to the engagement of students, the feedback they have offered, and the conversations they have participated in throughout the research and within interviews. The quantitative findings, while not fully reliable in the current study, could gain more significance with adjustments in research conditions and timeframe. The broader implications extend to education, policy, and the fostering of prosocial attitudes.

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Appendix

Activities and tasks

Below is a description and explanation of all activities and tasks devised and used as part of this research

News Stories

A primary strategy employed to convey a perspective of human nature as inherently good entailed the presentation of positive news stories to the class throughout the research period. To implement this approach, a compilation of positive news story videos sourced from 'The Uplift' news channel was curated (see references for link). This collection featured a combination of longer 20-minute videos and shorter 5-minute clips. The original plan encompassed daily viewings of these news stories, with students watching a 20-minute video each morning, complemented by shorter video segments when feasible.

The underlying aspiration was to emphasise the regular instances of positive contributions made by individuals as a means of instilling in students the recognition that prosocial behaviour is intrinsic to human nature. This approach aimed to foster the belief that, in reality, human beings generally possess a disposition towards caring for one another. The highlighted news stories predominantly showcased everyday individuals, with the deliberate aim of cultivating an atmosphere where such acts were perceived as customary and unremarkable. These narratives were also intended to serve as sources of inspiration, highlighting the transformative potential of even small contributions, and reinforcing the idea that such efforts can yield significant, positive impacts on the broader society.

Unfortunately, the implementation of this plan did not adhere to the initial expectations. Owing to time limitations, students did not view many of the intended videos as originally planned.

Additionally, since the teacher took responsibility for facilitating these sessions, the number of videos that students watched remains uncertain.

Possible worlds

Taking inspiration from the notion of possible worlds, especially found and utilised in philosophy, a booklet was created which was initially intended to be a homework project completed over 3 weeks. In a sense, a possible world is a way the world can consistently be conceived, in that it is logically feasible. Possible worlds are all of the possible ways the world could be. This notion was used as a premise for the project: envision a better and happier version of our world that we could work to achieve.

The subsequent parts of the project build upon the earlier tasks.

Part 1: Firstly, children were tasked with imagining and describing, through their preferred creative medium, a conceivable yet ideal world.

Part 2: For the second part, children were prompted to contemplate the changes that would be required for the real world to become their envisioned world. They were also asked to consider strategies for the implementation of these changes.

Part 3: In the concluding task, students were asked to do some research on the question, “Has anyone started this already?”. This phase provided students with the opportunity to investigate ongoing initiatives by individuals currently dedicated to improving the state of the world.

While originally designated as homework, practical constraints led to its eventual completion within the classroom setting. During these sessions the researcher was not in attendance and so the time dedicated to these tasks remains unclear.

Positive Figures Fact Files

For this exercise, students made their way around the class, examining fact files that featured individuals dedicated to making positive change. They were provided with a task sheet, which included spaces for noting 5 to 10 interesting facts, along with explanations for why they found them interesting. Students volunteered to feedback on what they had found to the class.

A conscious effort was made to ensure that resources used throughout the research exhibited diversity and inclusivity in their content and representation. Notably, conversations with students during this session underscored the significance of representation, a matter to be expounded upon in subsequent discussion.

Celebrities and Charities

For this task, a collection of images featuring various celebrities, each accompanied by their respective names and a brief description of their notable achievements, were positioned throughout the room within designated folders. These folders further included a corresponding set of bullet points detailing charitable endeavours in which these celebrities had actively engaged. The task assigned to the students was to work in groups to correctly match each celebrity to their respective acts of charity.

The motivation behind this activity was to underscore the principles of generosity and kindness. The intention was to normalise altruistic actions and demonstrate that individuals typically regarded as footballers or actors, for example, are, in fact, individuals who also offer support to

those in need. Moreover, the objective was to illuminate the charitable endeavours of children's role models, aiming to present acts of benevolence in an aspirational light, thereby fostering philanthropic inclinations among students.

Environmentally Conscious Figures - Fill in the gaps

In this activity, students engaged in tasks promoting knowledge sharing and active learning. Fact-file posters around the room showcased individuals who have made significant environmental contributions. Each student received a task sheet corresponding to one of these posters. The sheets were composed of facts to complete so students carefully reviewed the respective poster to fill in the gaps. This encouraged true engagement with the material as students needed to ensure they carefully read the information to complete the task.

Students were then tasked with finding a peer in the class who had examined a different poster. Each student was expected to impart their acquired knowledge about the individual featured on their poster to their partner. This reciprocal teaching approach promoted peer-to-peer learning, tested students on what they had been reading, and allowed them to talk about the details they had found most interesting.

At the end, students were encouraged to feedback and share what they had learnt with the class. Students were given the opportunity to share an interesting fact they had learnt from either their own or their partner's poster. They were then asked to mention why they found this particular fact interesting and were given follow-up questions prompting them to expand further. These conversations highlighted the genuine engagement of students with a great number eager to contribute very thoughtful responses.

Design your own YouTube Video

This activity began with the class watching two YouTube videos that both centred on making positive change; planting 20 million trees, and cleaning up 30 million pounds of rubbish from the ocean. Given the opportunity to do something similar, with the assumption of unlimited resources, students were asked to plan their own YouTube video. This included thinking of a title, designing a thumbnail, and devising a brief caption to explain their mission.

Watching these videos shed light on people who are actively making positive change, and showed that many people are willing to volunteer to get involved and help too. By designing their own video, students had the chance to engage in creative thinking about the actions they could take to effect change and make a meaningful impact.

Josie's Morning - Empathy Building Through Story

The objective of this exercise was to underscore the significance of empathy as an essential attribute. Initially, students were presented with a narrative featuring a character named Josie whose behaviour was characterised by apparent and unprovoked rudeness. This behaviour manifested in actions such as slamming doors, shouting at teachers, and insulting friends, collectively rendering her an unlikable figure.

Subsequent to the reading of this story, students engaged in a series of reflective inquiries, including assessments of their impressions of Josie, identification of specific story elements that influenced their perceptions of her, and introspection regarding any personal instances resembling Josie's behaviour.

Following this phase, students were introduced to a second iteration of the story, identical to the first but supplemented with sentences offering insights into the underlying circumstances and the thoughts and emotions experienced by Josie throughout the narrative.

Subsequently, students revisited their impressions of Josie, evaluated whether their perspectives had undergone any alteration, identified the factors within the story that contributed to their evolved perceptions, and shared recollections of instances when they themselves had faced challenging days.

At the end of the session there was a reflective presentation where the class contemplated the knowledge acquired from the activity.

While preceding activities had predominantly highlighted positive human actions, this exercise sought to initiate a discourse on the recognition that individuals sometimes engage in negative behaviours, often influenced by the complexities and challenges of life.

Freedom Reads - What would you put into a prison?

Expanding upon the emphasis on empathy established in the prior activity, this exercise centred on an examination of the philanthropic efforts of Reginald Dwayne Betts. Specifically, Betts' charitable initiative, Freedom Reads, is dedicated to the establishment of libraries within correctional facilities, premised on the notion that reading serves as a source of inspiration and affords individuals the capacity to envision new possibilities for their lives.

During this session, the class engaged in a discussion concerning the substantial role that luck and chance play in the trajectories of all individuals, underlining the significance of extending empathy and forgiveness to those facing adversity. Subsequently, students were tasked with devising proposals for items or resources they would choose to introduce within a prison environment, with the intention of affording individuals a second chance and an opportunity to imagine a positive future.

The motivation underpinning this particular task was to prompt a critical examination of the prevailing stereotypes and preconceived notions associated with the term 'prisoner.' The overarching objective was to underscore the perspective that individuals should not be categorically labelled as 'bad people,' but rather, actions deemed negative can arise from a multitude of complex factors.

In contrast to previous activities that emphasised the inherent positivity of human nature, this task was designed to confront the undeniable reality that there are indeed negative occurrences in the world, for which individuals may bear responsibility. It was conducted with the parallel intent of demonstrating that such acknowledgement does not necessarily conflict with the overarching themes explored in earlier phases of the study.

Exploring Our Nature

The constraints imposed by limited time availability necessitated the omission of certain planned activities. For the final day, a session was established by interweaving four distinct activities which afforded students the opportunity to choose their preferred focus. To establish coherence among these tasks, the instructional presentation explored various innate human traits, employing these traits as sources of inspiration for the respective activities. In essence, this approach enabled students to engage in tasks that aligned with these intrinsic qualities, thereby highlighting the positive aspects of their inherent nature.

1. Moral dilemma problem-solving

The class looked at the human ability to solve complex and often emotive problems which requires cooperation, tolerance and respect for one another. For this activity, a selection of moral dilemmas were given and students tried to solve these together.

2. Creating and Inventing

The class learned about human curiosity, creativity, and inventiveness. For the activity, a bag of random items were placed on a table in the class and students could use the objects as inspiration for inventing something that would solve a problem we face in the world. Their inventions did not need to be realistic and the objects could serve as inspiration in a very basic sense (or not at all) if they wished. Students

could envision this invention by physically creating it with the objects, or by drawing a design out on a piece of paper.

3. Empathy Story Writing

The class looked at empathy, altruism, imagination, and the human ability to tell stories. Taking inspiration from a previous activity, 'Josie's Morning', students could write their own story. The only requirements for the story were that the main character needed to start an argument, insult someone, and take something that did not belong to them. The story needed to provide readers with an understanding of the context so that they were lead to empathise with the character.

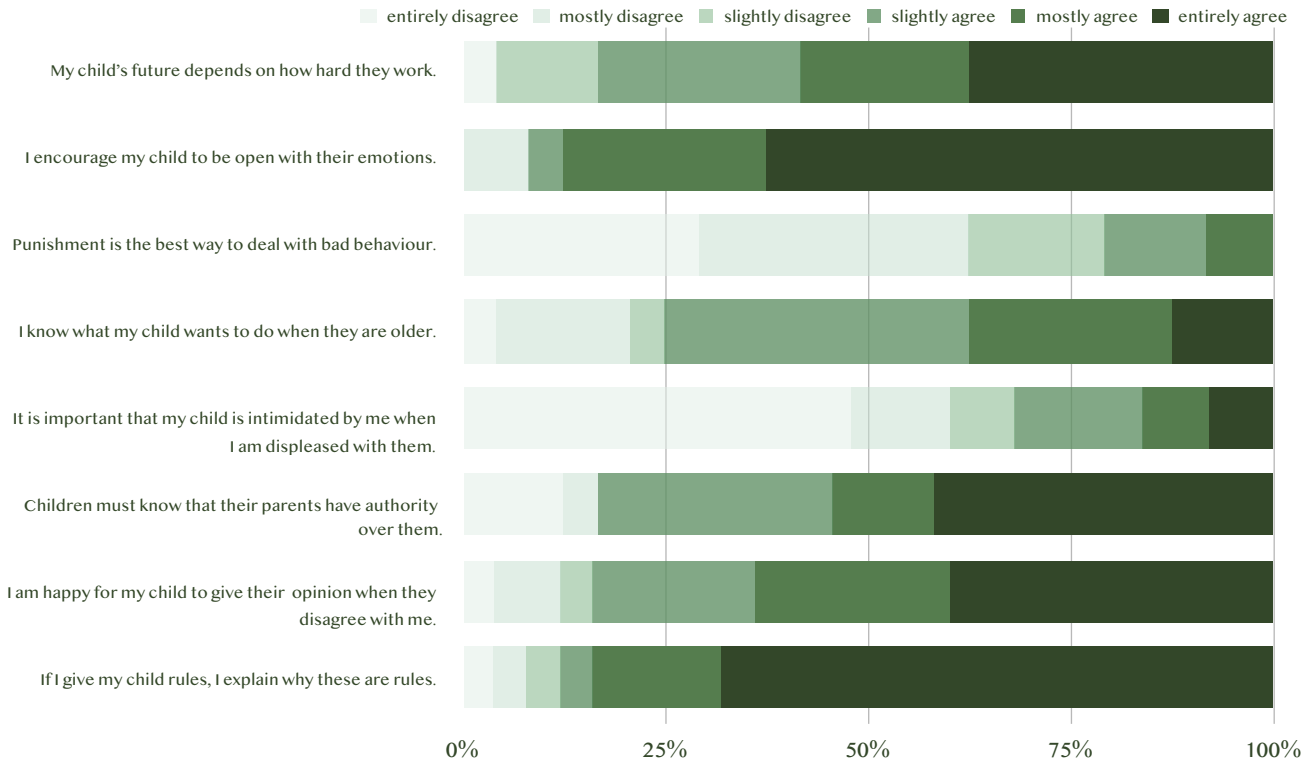
4. Planning For The Future

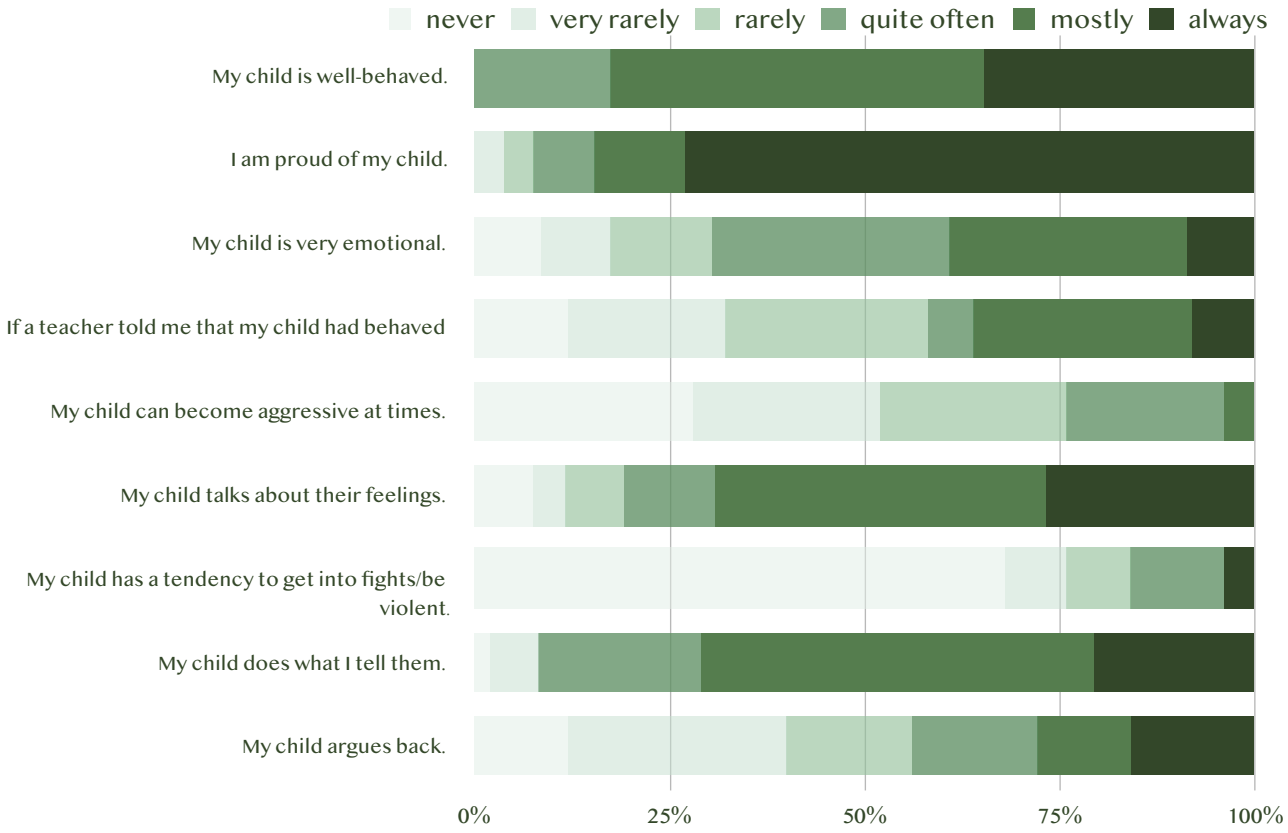
Students were introduced to human introspection and the faculty to set goals and envision the future. On an A3 poster, students were encouraged to explore various interconnected ideas, including personal sources of happiness, their individual aspirations, strategies for attaining these goals, and potential hurdles they might encounter. Importantly, students were prompted to reflect on ways to align their goals with environmentally responsible choices.

Some additional data

Answers from the first parent/carer questionnaire

Answers concerning the students

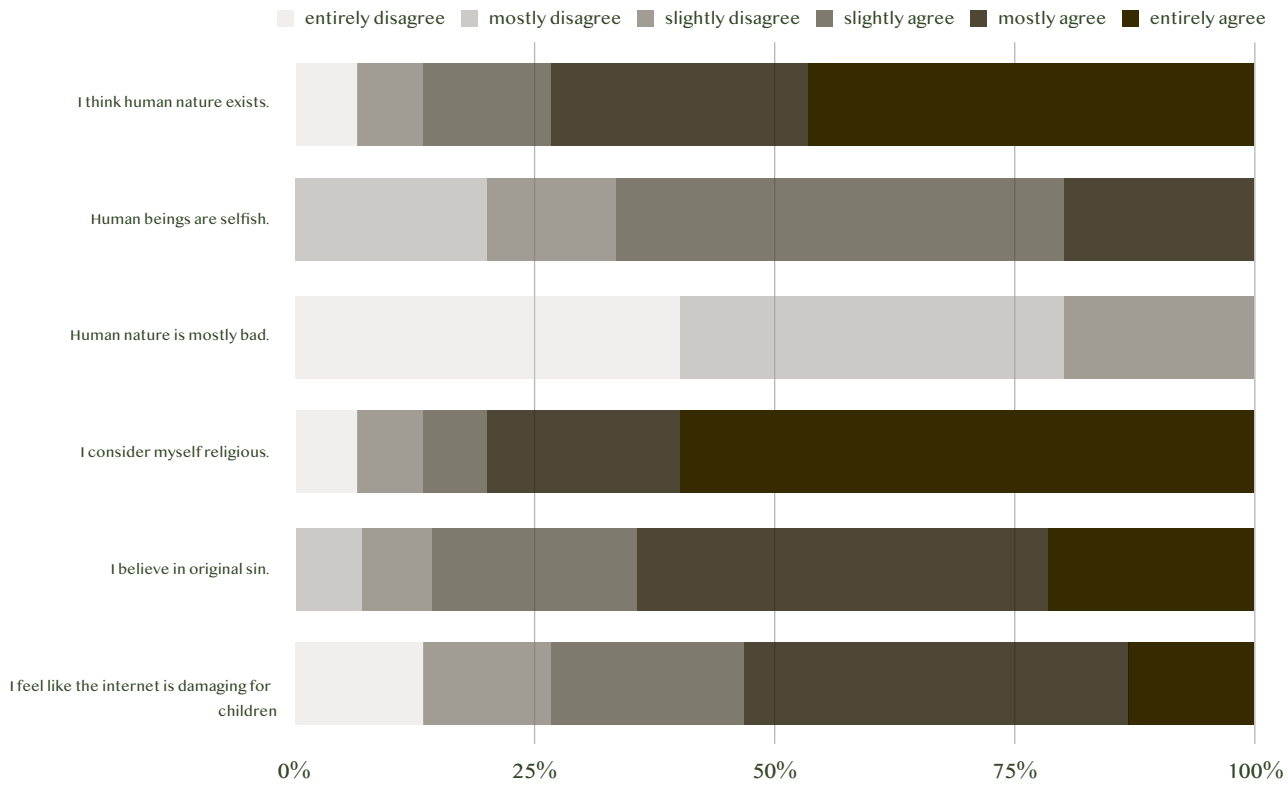


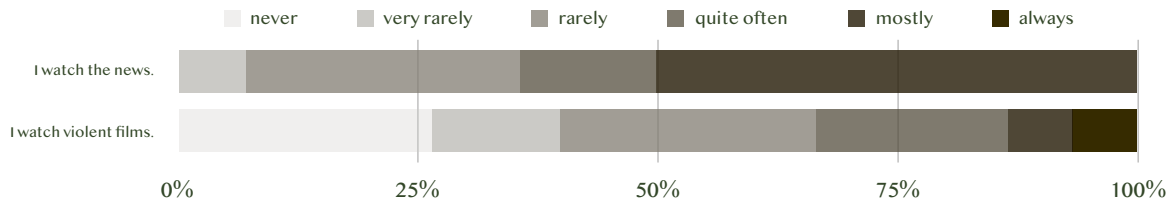


Answers from the second parent/carer questionnaire

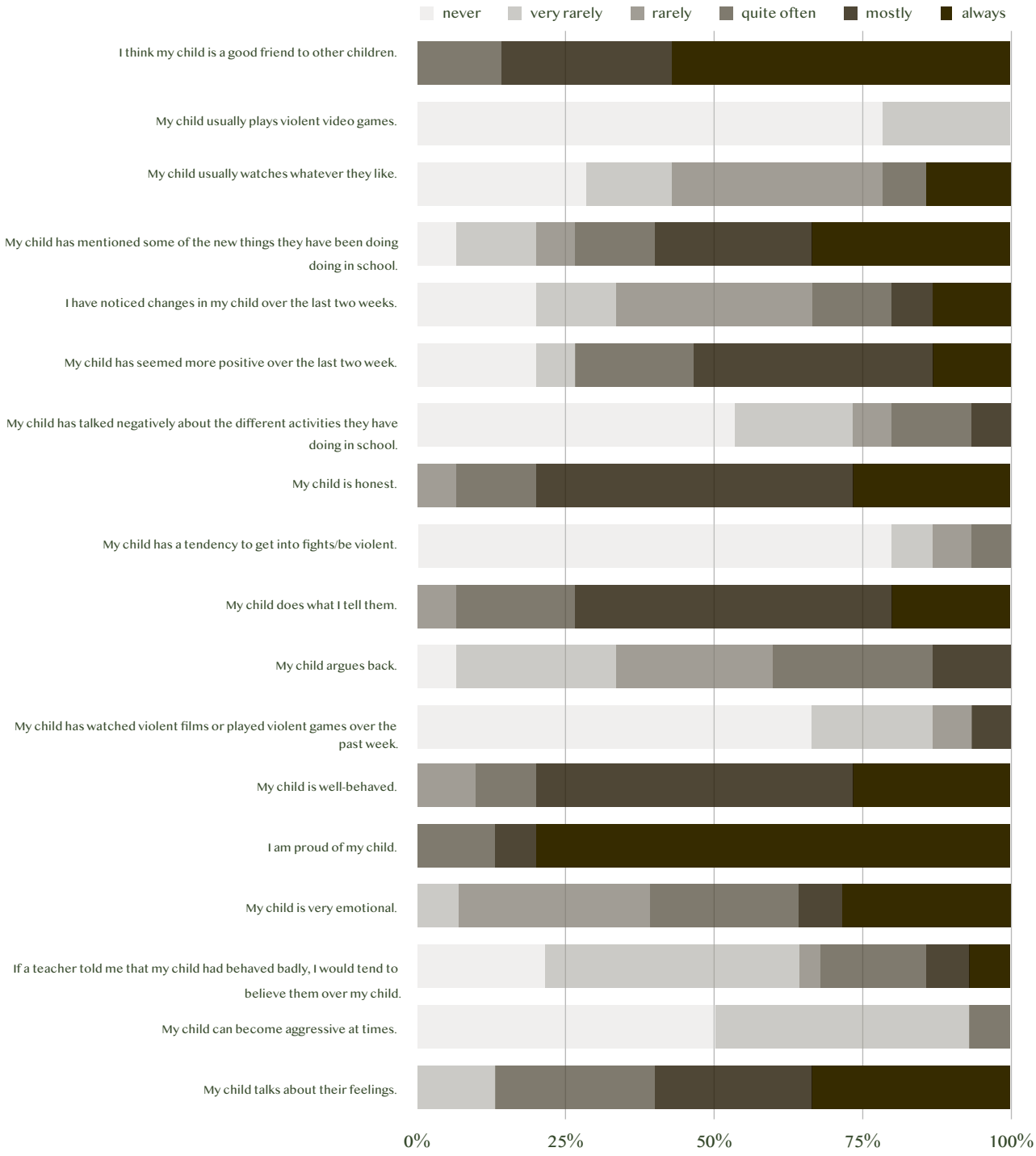
A sum of 15 questionnaires from the second set was returned by parents.

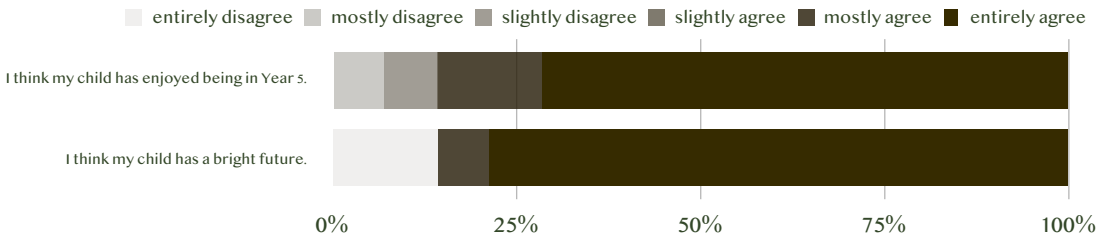
Answers concerning themselves/ own views





Answers concerning the students




entirely disagree
mostly disagree
slightly disagree
slightly agree
mostly agree
entirely agree
I think my child has enjoyed being in Year 5.
I think my child has a bright future.
0%
25%
50%
75%
100%