

Why and how should we encourage young people to research their local parks and green spaces?

A blog by Francis Gilbert: <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/clcl-blog/why-and-how-should-we-encourage-young-people-to-research-their-local-parks-and-green-spaces/>

Our parks have a problem with young people. While our parks cater for children aged 0-8 years with playgrounds, they too frequently make older children feel unwelcome and unwanted, particularly young people from poorer backgrounds. This is because young people struggle to find their own spaces and activities in them, and often feel they are unfairly blamed for things like anti-social behaviour (Aalst & Brands: 2021; Brown 2013). The privatisation of park spaces has led to them feeling victimised by various authorities (such as security guards, park wardens and the police) and excluded from parks, even though parks are one of the few places they can come together in groups. While small minorities, such as skateboarders, might be provided for in terms of activities, the majority of young people have few activities open to them, and little power to say what they want from their parks (Brown 2013).

So what can be done?

The research we are doing at Goldsmiths intends to change this situation. It's called the Parklife Project and it's headed by myself, but involves many different academics, students, school pupils and people connected to parks, both professional and 'amateur'.

The aim of the research is to make young people feel like they can engage properly with their parks, and use parks to foster their own wellbeing and environmental awareness as well as other park users. Fortunately, this March 2022, we were delighted to receive some seed funding from Goldsmiths' Strategic Research Fund to carry out a pilot for what we hope could be a much bigger project. So far the results have been wonderful.

Connecting up with the British Academy and Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS-UK), we brought together a number of undergraduates and masters' students from Goldsmiths, and helped them work with some pupils at a secondary school near to the university. The Parklife project seeks to see if more creative approaches to research can be successful, so as part of the research process, 11-14 year old pupils worked the Goldsmiths' students to write poems, to draw pictures, to photograph and film their local park. They then reflected upon this work, and took the research process further by questioning school pupils, park users of all sorts, local businesses ecological experts and professionals connected with parks, such as park managers and people who organise the contracts for parks. Using this research, they have drawn up action points for improving their local park, and will be addressing policy makers, local politicians, representatives from park user groups, the police and park managers about what they think should be done. The aim is for young people to learn how to research their parks and promote meaningful ecological, social and psychological change in park users.

You can watch a video which explains how the Goldsmiths' students went about conducting the research here: <https://youtu.be/R3ppVIUMjo8>

You can also read a Goldsmiths' student's blog [about the project here](#).

References

Aalst, I-van & Brands, J. (2021) Young people: being apart, together in an urban park, *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 14:1, 1-17, DOI: 10.1080/17549175.2020.1737181

Brown, D.M. (February 2013) Young People, Anti-social Behaviour and Public Space: The Role of Community Wardens in Policing the 'ASBO Generation' Author(s): *Urban Studies* Vol. 50, No. 3, Special Issue: Young People's Im/Mobile Urban Geographies (FEBRUARY 2013), pp. 538-555 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26144227>

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