

## **“That was another moment where people were like ‘wow! These young people have really done something!’”**

**Christina McMellon**

*A conversation between three young people who designed and wrote a storybook challenging gender stereotypes, supported by Christina McMellon Associate Researcher, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh.*

### **Young Edinburgh Action**

Young Edinburgh Action (YEA) is a participation project supported by City of Edinburgh Council. YEA enables young people to set an agenda for action and supports groups of young people to undertake research and make recommendations on topics about which they feel strongly. The approach draws on academic research suggesting that a move away from formalised participation structures towards opening up spaces for inquiry, dialogue and action can enable young people’s meaningful participation and active citizenship (Percy-Smith, 2010). The YEA model is made up of several interconnected core activities that respond to and feed into other youth services in Edinburgh and across Scotland:

### **Gatherings**

Gatherings, which take place annually, are events planned and facilitated by young people with the aim of identifying issues that young people want to be taken forward by the action research groups. Gatherings ensure that young people set the agenda and focus for YEA.

### **Action Research Groups**

Action research groups are at the heart of YEA’s approach and enable a core group of young people to explore and present the views of a wider group of young people in

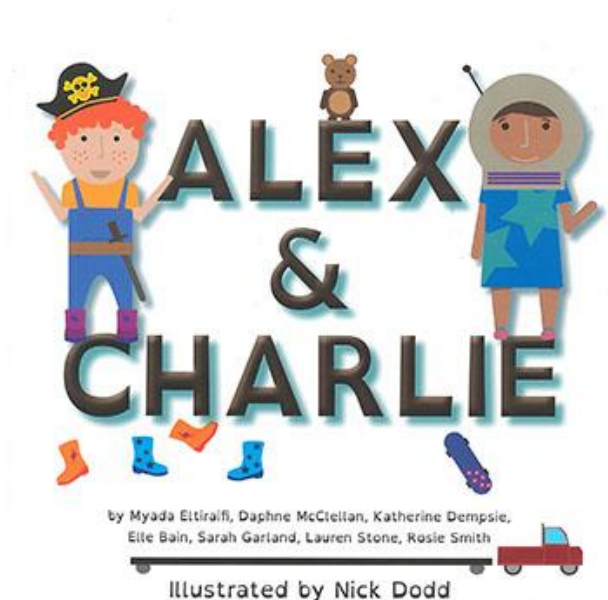
Edinburgh. An action research group is established for each of the topics chosen at the Gathering. The group is open to any young people who are interested in the topic and is usually made up of between 6 and 15 young people. The way that the group operates is flexible, depending upon the topic and the participants, but with the support of YEA staff each action research group will:

- Think about the topic and what it means for young people in Edinburgh
- Investigate the current situation around this topic and find out the views of other young people in Edinburgh
- Make recommendations to the people who make decisions about this topic

### **Conversations for Action**

From the beginning of the action research process the groups discuss the impact that they hope to have. A Conversation for Action is convened at the end of each action research process. The agenda for the conversation is set by young people and the meeting is chaired by the senior worker in YEA. This meeting is an important interface where young people and adult decision-makers invited by the young people come together to discuss the topic and develop an action plan.

### **Gender Inequality: Alex and Charlie**



At the YEA Gathering in 2015 young people chose gender inequality as a topic for an action research group. For over 2 years the group explored the topic and decided that they wanted to write a storybook for very young children to challenge gender stereotypes. In 2017 the group was granted funding to publish the book and print 2 copies for every nursery and primary school in Edinburgh. The following conversation is an edited transcript of a discussion between myself and three young people who were involved in the group and in writing ‘Alex and Charlie’.

**K:** I’m K I’m 17 and I was already involved in YEA because I’m interested in changing my community and realised after being in it that we could do that quite well on a much larger scale than I thought and then when I got the opportunity to get involved in such a big topic I was like YES! Let’s do this!

**M:** I’m M, I’m 16 and I also got involved through YEA, ummm, obviously the topic was really really important to me and I’m from a background where the topic wasn’t really talked about at all, but it is important and should be talked about and should be tackled.

**D:** I’m D, I’m 17, I got involved after the YEA Gathering where we decide what issues to research and obviously gender equality is really important and so I came along and, once I got into the group, the ideas were really good and I thought they might be going somewhere.

**Christina:** I was so pleased when gender inequality came up at the gathering because I think it’s such an important topic. Why do you think people chose it?

**K:** it wasn’t a surprise that people chose it because it’s such a big topic at the moment

**Christina:** Why do you think that gender inequality is such a big issue for young people?

**M:** it’s so prominent in our lives, it’s all around us

**D:** it's everywhere, yeah, everyone's affected by gender inequality

**Christina:** can anyone remember why we decided to organise an event to collect our data?

**K:** we needed to ask for more information and we wanted to ask people about what's happening in their life and you can't really get people to tell in a survey

**M:** yeah...it is part of the action research process...to get information from other people

**D:** I remember we watched a video [in a YEA meeting] and it had some people telling about their experiences and other people in the room were like...I had that experience too and then we were thinking that other people probably have had too and we'd like to collect those experiences.

**Christina:** Who can remember anything about the event?

**K:** we had a graffiti wall!

**D:** and there was like a rotating group thing where people went round and did lots of different activities

**M:** My favourite part was like the discussion when we went into one of the little rooms and it was just like a big debate and I remember we didn't have enough time to end our debate because we all wanted to speak

**Christina:** one of the things that I found really interesting at that event was how many terms young people were using that some of the adults in the room had no idea about. Did that surprise you guys? I remember there was a conversation about intersectionality and a few of the adults were like 'whaaat?'

**K:** I don't think it surprised me because I know a lot of young people have a lot more knowledge than adults just cos of generations and stuff because some things just didn't exist in society then...

**D:** I think I remember someone explaining pansexual...and asexual as well...there was a lot of sexuality discussion but I only remember tiny details

**Christina:** was there anything in the event that surprised you?

**K:** the topic definitely made people come out of their shell more, because we were quite concerned that people might not be prepared to talk but within the first rotation everyone was like...RIGHT! OK...well this is my topic!

**Christina:** so, after the event, what happened?

**M:** it's such a long time ago...

(laughter)

**Christina:** I remember having a meeting where we got all the information from the event out and looking at what people had been talking about and all I remember was that there were two big things that came out of that meeting that people kept saying again and again about needing to challenge gender stereotypes and about age and how we need to be challenging gender stereotypes with young children and how it's too late by the time you get to 14 and 15...is that right, do you remember that?

**M:** yes, I remember that meeting. There was so much information.

**Christina:** I don't remember who it was who suggested writing a children's book to challenge gender stereotypes. Can anyone remember?

**K:** yeah, I think it got mentioned when we were doing the group about sex education but it didn't quite fit then, but then it came round again and everyone was like yeah...this idea's already come up and it's good.

**Christina:** so, what were your first impressions about the idea of writing a book?

**M:** at first I was like, lol, that's not going to happen...can we do that?...do we have the resources and the budget and whatever to be able to do that?...and the time?...but as it when on and as it became more like possible...yeah we all jumped into it head first and got on with it

**Christina:** can you remember the point where you thought 'actually, yeah, maybe this is gonna happen'?

**K:** I think for me it was when Nick [a graphic designer] started sending the illustrations cos like having all the words and that it was like 'oh, well this is a children's book, is this even a good children's book?' but then when we had all the pictures it was like 'oh. Wow. This *is* a children's book'.

**D:** Yeah...I think even when we decided that Nick was going to be doing the illustrations for us I thought like...if he's invested in it then we've got an illustrator, we *have* to do it

**Christina:** can you remember anything about how we developed the story? It feels like such a long time ago now...

**All:** yeah

**M:** I think, wasn't it like we wanted it to be really normal, like sort of everyday situations that we would've had to have gone through as kids and then putting in the sort of things where gender inequality happens

**Christina:** what's your favourite bit in the story?

**M:** the last page where they've painted who they want to be when they grow up and it sort of brings the entire book to a sweet close cos they realise that they can be whoever and whatever they want to be when they are older and that they shouldn't let anyone stop them from that and that they are both the same

**K:** I just realised that we wrote it so that sometimes it was adults correcting the kids and sometimes it was the kids correcting the adults, I just realised that, I didn't click on to that before. So, the firefighter says, yeah you can be a fire-fighter and a woman and then later Charlie says yeah, I can be a woman and a pirate...

**D:** so, it's like a learning relationship between adults and kids, it goes both ways!

**K:** for a while I was scared that it wasn't going to be an interesting children's book, I was like oh my god...I was worried we were making it too day-to-day life, but then as it progressed and then we did like the pilot studies and kids loved it and wanted to take it home I was like...thank god!

**Christina:** tell me a bit about the piloting in schools?

**M:** It was so fun, I had such a good time. We went from nursery to P3 and we read and reread the book and got loads of questions from the kids and none of them really clocked that it was about gender equality and they just really liked the book, so they didn't see anything wrong and they saw the whole thing as really really normal...which was exactly what we wanted...like to catch them before they see the stereotypes

**Christina:** were you nervous when you went in?

**M:** I was worried that they wouldn't find it interesting or like they'd think...there's no dragons swooping to get the kids or anything! But they really enjoyed it.

**Christina:** Can you remember the focus group that we had with professionals?

**All:** yes

**K:** oh yeah and they kept saying something and we'd say well 'actually we've already thought about that!'

**Christina:** and then there's the activity pack...

**K:** ...that was so fun to do.

**D:** I think the teacher's pack really adds a lot to the storybook.

**Christina:** yeah... cos the book's point is that it doesn't constantly talk about gender but this gives teachers ways to link it to gender and to stereotypes  
So...then the Conversation for Action, what do you remember about that?

**K:** I just remember that guy [Alistair Gaw: Director of Communities and Families at City of Edinburgh Council] saying, 'ok cool, we'll fund it' and we were like 'ok!!'. I just remember there being no negative feedback and them being so taken aback by us...they were a bit like 'oh god, you've done your research, you really have'

**Christina:** yeah cos we were really nervous about it. We were like 'we *have* to get the funding for this'

**K:** I was thinking more they'd tell us about some tiny library charity somewhere that we could apply to and then he was like...ok we'll pay for it and it'll go to every single school... It was kind of like the meeting finished really early, like we said stuff afterwards but the actual meeting...like the decision was made in the first few minutes

**Christina:** and then the launch...

**M:** that was such good fun



**K:** and we had so much positive feedback from that. That was another moment where people were like ‘wow! These young people have really done something!’

**Christina:** Have you given the books to people you know?

**M:** yes, I kept one for myself, I gave one to my school, and I gave 2 to my two favourite teachers in my primary school, like the ones who helped me form my ideas as a kid because I grew up in an environment where they didn’t have all those ideas so it was my teachers who suggested and made me think, so I gave it to them and I said ‘this is because of you, thank you’. One of them started crying, it was nice.

**K:** I gave one to my aunty’s friend’s little boy who wears a dress and, apparently, they read it all the time. I remember they took it and read it and then they came back to me and said ‘can you write a wee note on it so that when he grows up, like he’ll know he knew you’ and I didn’t know what to write...

I explained the whole process of doing the research and writing the book to his mum and said I thought it might be good for him because there’s a boy wearing a dress and apparently he pointed out the dress...and said something like ‘oh my god the dress has stars on it’ and I was like...that’s so cute

**Christina:** How do you feel about the book now?

**M:** It’s weird, I feel like we didn’t write it almost, like we had nothing to do with it and then I think...’WOAH but we did do it and this is our work!’

**Christina:** I’m so proud of you guys. It’s one of my favourite bits of work that I’ve been involved in! Do you think you learned anything from being involved?

**D:** Of course!

**M:** No dream’s too big! Who knew we were going to be publish authors at 16?

**D:** I feel a bit weird about that actually, like I feel a bit weird having my name on it ...I'm not saying I regret having my name on it, but it feels a bit weird

**M:** I love having my name on it.

**K:** I cared about having YEA on it but not the individual names.

**K:** I think I also learned a lot about the reality of publishing a book, it was like 'oh god, people go through a lot to do this'

**D:** I learned that there's a special dyslexia font that it's easier to read if you have dyslexia

**K:** Yeah and I feel like it's important to point out that we were the ones who thought about that, not the adults

**Christina:** Is gender something that you guys talk about with your friends?

**K:** If someone in my friendship group says something negative, 100% I'll pipe up, I'll be like 'arggg...you shouldn't be saying that' and they'll say 'I know but it's just like you guys' and I'll say 'I know but us guys are still affected by it so...'

**Christina:** Do you think you do that more because you've been involved in this group?

**K:** I think I chose to get involved because I already do that – but this probably makes me more knowledgeable in doing so

**M:** I would probably speak up more now because of this group, because now I know that lots of people have the same opinions as me.

**D:** And it gives you a bit of a back as well. Like people think you are just talking and talking about it...

**K:** Yeah people say...well what are you going to do about it?

**D:** and now I can say 'I've written a book!'

### **References**

Percy-Smith, B (2010) Councils, consultations and community: rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation. *Children's Geographies* 8: 107-122.