

Independent Academic Research Studies

Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS) is a youth led social policy think-tank that aims to empower young people to influence policy and practices that affect them. IARS works principally with young people 16-25 yrs old, particularly those who are marginalised because of their race, sexual orientation, disability, gender, faith or background. However, it is fair to say that many young people, irrespective of their background find it difficult to engage with 'the law'. They are disempowered because they don't have the knowledge or capability to challenge processes and decisions.

Empowerment of the young people who come to IARS is a process that begins firstly with identifying need, whether that be a local authority omitting to include the youth voice in a housing development, or a bullying policy that fails to protect one group of young people. For the young people to make a difference and try to influence change requires developing skills through training, and includes becoming aware of the legal structures that govern various aspects of the country. It is at this point that PLE plays its most important part in IARS' youth led projects, by improving young people's legal competency and capability.

Innovative approach to PLE

IARS' approach to PLE is to present it as a tool for young people to help solve the issues they have identified. Being an organisation that focuses on the needs of equality groups and human rights, it has developed its own human rights training programme. This is a flexible course just for young people that equip them with the 'language' and principles of human rights, with a focus on how the Human Rights Act 1998 works. This is then put in context by looking at case studies that are relevant to their interest, whether this is how a policeman has conducted a stop and search exercise or treatment by their local GP. The course is not approached in an academic way, but rather focuses on the day to day issues that young people face. The result is that they are engaged, interested and inspired by the possibilities of their new knowledge and skills. (for more information about IARS' training programme visit <http://www.iars.org.uk>)

PLE in action

One example of how IARS' approach to PLE works is the youth led Homophobic Bullying and Human Rights Project. A group of young people came together because they felt that using a human rights approach to tackling this form of bullying in schools would be successful. The training they received allowed them to explore the legal landscape around bullying, with an emphasis on relevant human rights law. From the training they were given the confidence to conduct their own further research on other related legal issues. With that knowledge they were then able to think about how they could form anti-bullying policies that would be feasible and make sense within the current system. This approach really allowed them to engage with their issue and most importantly apply their new knowledge and legal capability to their problem. The result was that the project's young people all developed a very strong sense of how human rights works in principle and. The project's final report can be seen at http://www.iars.org.uk/iars_publications_in_2008.htm .

For more information on IARS' projects please contact Lewis Parle, Head of Youth Programmes and Research at l.parle@iars.org.uk

IARS is about to embark on a new public legal education project titled "Young Justice Champions Project". The project will skill up a team of young people who are not in full time education or employment and provide them with the knowledge and skills to advise other young people on basic criminal justice issues. We are looking for organisations that may be interest to be involved or support the project for more information please contact Lewis Parle using the e-mail address above.

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