

Research Space

Journal article

Whose 'voice' is it anyway? The paradoxes of the participatory narrative

Papadopoulou, Marianna and Sidorenko, Ewa

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Papadopoulou, M. and Sidorenko, E. (2021), Whose 'voice' is it anyway? The paradoxes of the participatory narrative. Br Educ Res J. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3770>, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3770>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited."

Whose 'voice' is it anyway? The paradoxes of the participatory narrative

Marianna Papadopoulou^{1,*} | Ewa Sidorenko²

¹ School of Education and Childhood Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK

² Education and Community Studies, University of Greenwich, Greenwich, UK

Corresponding author: Marianna Papadopoulou, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities and Educational Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU, UK. Email: Marianna.papadopoulou@canterbury.ac.uk

Abstract

This study discusses some of the paradoxes found in the rhetoric of participatory research. Research-with-children views them as competent and agentic and as social actors, as citizens with opinions that must be listened to and given due weight. This image of the child as a social actor fails to acknowledge the structural, contextual and relational conditions that can afford or restrict opportunities for children's agentic action. It conceals the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional properties of power that shape children's (and adults') contributions and 'voices'. Our research took place in a primary school and aimed at training Year 6 children to carry out their own research on their chosen topic of interest. The participatory research 'space' was informed by the participants' different intentionalities and agendas. The children were invited to take initiatives and make decisions, to be agentic. However, their agency, or what counts as 'proper' agency, was framed and defined in our adult terms. Tensions arose when the children's agendas conflicted with and threatened ours. As we argue here, this participatory space should rather be seen as a political arena, where different and often competing agendas are at play, where the roles and relationships between children and adults are far from fixed, and where the capacity for agentic action is always socially mediated and shaped by social structure.

Keywords

agency and structure | agendas | children's voices | dimensions of power | intentionalities | participatory narrative

Introduction

Participatory research appears to be an umbrella term that includes different types and degrees of child input, from positioning children as competent informants to supporting them to undertake the role of the researcher (Hart, 1997). When assuming the role of researchers, children make all of the research decisions, from conception to the dissemination of findings, using adults as facilitators (Thomas, 2017). The latter strand was the methodological tool we employed in this study.

This relatively new paradigm sees the child as a social actor and as a citizen with rights; both reflect the image of the child in the new sociology of childhood and the global children's rights discourse, respectively. The new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 2000) recognises children as social actors and as competent meaning makers, as protagonists of their lives and as having an active role in constructing their own childhoods (Frazer, 2004).

In a similar vein, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) adds a political dimension to this new childhood discourse: according to Article 12 children have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Their views must be given due consideration, according to the child's age and maturity.

The image of the child-as-a social-actor and as a citizen with participatory rights makes certain assumptions about children's status, competence and agency. It assumes 'a view of children as sentient beings who can act with intention and as agents in their own lives' (Greene & Hill, 2005: 3). This notion of children as autonomous, agentic beings, however, may be at odds with the roles and positioning of children in different contexts of their everyday lives.

Our study attempts to unravel and challenge some of the naive and misconceived claims that we have identified in the participatory narrative, especially with regards to power and agency. We call these paradoxes. The first three paradoxes refer to the role of power and the workings of power relationships between adults and children in participatory research. We then address the notion of agency, both adults' and children's. We first explore the origins of children's agency, arguing that the propensity to be agentic, to act upon the world, may be an inborn trait that manifests itself early in life, but its shape, form and expression are always socially mediated. The last two paradoxes problematise the claims of children's agency, found in the participatory narrative.

The aim of our research was to support school-aged children to develop research skills in order to carry out their own projects, and collect, write and present their findings to different audiences. It took place in a Primary School and involved working with Year 6 volunteers. The two adult researchers assumed the role of facilitators of the children's research engagement. Our Methodology section details our ways of working with the children.

As we explain in our Discussion, our (adult) agenda was met successfully; the children's work was completed and presented at assembly and at a conference by the children themselves. What happened in the duration of this study, however, generated another layer of data about our relationships and interactions in the school context. Our encounters with the children involved excitement and positive exchanges, but also tensions, conflicts and power struggles. At times it felt like a power minefield, where different, and often conflicting, agendas were at

play. This layer of data, regarding the relationships and interactions of all participants (children and adults), is thematically analysed and the focus of our discussion here.

The tensions underpinning the participatory narrative

The New Sociology of Childhood and children's rights discourse view children as having conceptual autonomy, as active, engaged and agentic social actors that exercise influence upon their social world (Christensen & Prout, 2005). This childhood image has been driven by a moral and political imperative: to readdress power imbalances between adults and children, empower a historically silenced group and find ways to research children that do not reproduce adults' perspectives (Holloway *et al.*, 2019). Children's agency, however, has not been thoroughly theorised. It has been of an exercise more in politics than in theory (Oswell, 2012).

The participative narrative has thus been criticised for having flaws and suffering from 'methodological immaturity' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), for using a 'cosy' language that 'masks' the lack of opportunities children are offered to make decisions in 'real' life (Lundy, 2007), for underestimating the impact of power differentials between adults and children (Hunleth, 2011) and for becoming a new 'text positivism' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) that lacks critical awareness of the contextual factors that shape the products of research with children.

What seems to lie at the heart of these criticisms is vagueness and uncertainty about the actual role and position of children and of adults and their relationship in this (perhaps unfamiliar) participatory territory. In its otherwise noble commitment to empowering children, the participatory discourse has under-played the workings of power and the dynamic relationship between agency and structure. Power and agency have been significantly under-theorised in participatory research (Atkinson, 2019) and this has given rise to a number of paradoxes.

The paradoxes of power

The participatory discourse often disregards the complexity and pervading nature of power or sees it in a binary fashion, as the power exercised from adults to children. As we argue here, power is layered, multi-directional and multi-dimensional. It permeates the participatory research space and shapes roles, relationships, agendas and even our perceptions of what is possible. As Manion (2007: 405) states, 'research on children's participation is better framed as being about child–adult relations'. We present the multiple layers of power misconceptions and the paradoxes that they lead to, starting with the most basic assumption: that power is something that can be finished with only if adults decide.

Paradox 1: giving the power to children

The participatory endeavour involves *giving children the power* and central stage position to contribute their insights. This can lead to several ambiguities, notwithstanding an essentialist notion of children's agency, which will be discussed later. It also assumes that power is a possession, a property that can be held by a group and given away, or shared with another. It follows that, once given away, the receptors can now possess it and make use of it to reposition themselves.

The two groups here are ‘adults’ and ‘children’, both seen as homogeneous in terms of competence, interests and needs and as existing independently of each other (Lee, 2001). It also assumes that all that it takes for power to disperse is a decision to disperse it. A number of researchers, however, have claimed that adult power is always present; it permeates, shapes and restricts opportunities for participation and can even filter children’s contributions.

According to Kim (2017), research with and by children requires the support of adults. Indeed, adults have a significant role in and perform a balancing act between facilitating and managing, controlling, limiting or even hijacking children’s research. The children’s role, agency and contribution are mediated by adult gatekeepers. Indeed, adults play a pivotal role in emancipating children to realise their rights (Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017).

In Hunleth’s (2011) view, the notion of child-led research appears to circumvent the need to address the power imbalances between children and adults. Power differentials are present in all research and especially research involving children and adults. The whole idea of participation presupposes that children may be competent social actors (beings), but at the same time they can only exercise their participatory rights if their participation is deemed appropriate by adult gatekeepers. Kellett (2009) argues that in research with children it is adults who mostly design methodologies and this often makes the nature of participation tokenistic. Adults ‘filter’ children’s contribution at every stage of the research process. This applies even in research conducted by the children themselves.

All of these studies acknowledge that the power between adults and children is not easy to disperse and impacts on children’s ability to contribute their insights. It is deeply embedded in social structures and forms the backdrop to adult–child relationships and interactions, even in this participatory territory.

However, this configuration of power described so far appears to be single dimensional and one way: from adults to children. This leads to the second paradox.

Paradox 2: the binary of power relationships

The adult–child binary is one of the most powerful and rigid organisational structures (Atkinson, 2019), with adults seen as the dominant group and children their subordinates (Gallagher, 2008). Indeed, all arguments presented so far in this paper suggest that power has a given, single direction: from adults to children. In this generational ordering (Mayall, 2000), adults and children are viewed as members of two opposing and mutually exclusive categories occupying the two ends on the continuum of power. The participatory narrative calls for a redistribution of power, to ensure that it is shared equally and fairly between the two groups (Gallagher, 2008).

This redistributive model, however, fails to acknowledge the different layers and dynamics of power; it glosses over all other instances where power is exercised, from children to adults, from some adults to others and from some children to other children (Gallagher, 2008).

Indeed, the narrative of empowerment, often driven by romantic ideas about the virtuosity of youth (Holloway et al. 2019), masks the workings of power and control that children exercise and their enactment of tactical power to dominate (Atkinson, 2019). It ‘tends to obscure the complex multivalency of power as it is exercised within the spaces where research is carried out’ (Gallagher, 2008: 137).

Viewing power relationships only through the lens of generational ordering may fail to capture the multitude of ways in which children may exploit, contest, resist, appropriate or even comply with the participatory agenda (Gallagher, 2008). It assumes that children's engagement is a wilful act of consent, that children 'want' to participate but are often constrained by powerful adults. This leads us to the third paradox.

Paradox 3: the freedom of choice

The notion of power as a property attributed to individuals and groups (such as children) presumes freedom of choice, autonomy and independent decision making. This makes it 'essentially contested' (Lukes, 2005). Lukes' notion of three-dimensional power can be employed here to examine the ways in which the participatory narrative itself can become a form of dominant ideology that sets the agenda and secures the consent of willing subjects, or can be resisted, refused and contested.

Lukes (2005) identifies three interrelated facets, or dimensions of power, in a nested structure. The first, most immediate and explicit dimension is the decision making power. This type is the most obvious as it is manifest in situations when one makes their wishes count, even if others disagree. The second is the power to control the agenda. It is less obvious and explicit, but more basic in its power to decide what is decided. It is thus pervasive in the sense that it sets the agenda; it frames what is to be seen as appropriate and 'legitimate' action. The third dimension, perhaps the most implicit and 'covert' form, is the power to form ideologies that influence individuals' beliefs and shape understandings of what is deemed as possible, acceptable and even desirable.

The first, most explicit manifestation of power in Lukes' (2005) theory is the one usually referred to in the participatory narrative. It is reflected in the ongoing debate about the extent to which child-led research is initiated and controlled by the children themselves. Kellett (2009) argues that in research with children it is adults that mostly design methodologies and this often makes the nature of participation tokenistic. Adults 'filter' children's contribution at every stage of the research process. This applies even in research conducted by the children themselves.

This manifestation of power, however, can only be understood if we consider the second layer—the power to control the agenda. Adult agendas are influenced by their perceptions of their roles, duties and responsibilities in a given setting, but also by their understandings of generational ordering and positioning in relation to children (Mayall, 2000; Davies, 2017). They may prioritise their duty to protect, teach or discipline children; they may feel the pressure to meet demands and reach academic targets, which is often the case in educational environments. Adults thus become the gatekeepers rather than the facilitators and children's participation becomes an adult tool that is often used for socialisation purposes (Kim, 2017).

The third layer is perhaps the most implicit and far reaching, as it uses an ideology to justify what is appropriate, acceptable and possible. The participatory narrative can become complicit in creating and sustaining this layer whilst at the same time contesting the previous two types. Its ideological framework can become a kind of dogma, the new text positivism (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) that sets the 'rules' for this participatory game; it explicates what 'proper' participation should look like; it shapes behaviours and relationships, expectations and norms.

The very notion of inviting children to participate in research implies that there is a predetermined activity that children are invited to take part in (Gallacher & Gallacher, 2008) and this activity is shaped by adults' agendas and the ideological framework that frames what 'participation' should be about. The children's way of engaging is already pre-planned, resourced, timed and regulated by adults. The children may initially be unaware of what this participatory activity really involves, what they are expected to do and for what purpose. The freedom to participate, however, involves much more than an 'invitation'. It is the result of 'praxis', of ongoing engagement, negotiations between the adults and children and perhaps often conflict. Denying this tension may often lead to tokenistic, inauthentic participatory attempts that, at best, meet the adult agendas.

The whole idea of participation presupposes that children may be competent social actors (beings), but at the same time they can only exercise their participatory rights if their participation is deemed appropriate by adult gatekeepers. This ideology of what is deemed as appropriate serves to convince the participants (children and adults) about the legitimacy and benefit of engaging in particular ways. It shapes the beliefs and desires of participants and can thus secure compliance and consent—or be met with defiance and resistance. This resonates with our experiences in this study.

We will revisit and keep discussing these dimensions and dynamics of power as we focus on children's participatory engagement and agentic action. The notion of children's agency is not sufficiently theorised in this new participatory narrative (Oswell, 2012) and this can give rise to a number of paradoxes. These will be discussed next.

The paradoxes of agency

'Agency' is the ability of an individual to knowingly and deliberately act in order to achieve predetermined outcomes (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). It is seen as the 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001: 112) and as self-determination, or the ability to act independently (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016) in order to fulfil a purpose. These definitions assume an autonomous being, an agent, that consciously and deliberately plans and executes some sort of action in order to achieve certain outcomes. The agent is positioned in a sociocultural context that somehow informs or influences his/her action. This begs the questions of where this agency comes from in the first place and what the role of the environment is in shaping, facilitating or restricting its expression.

The developmental perspective considers agency as part of a child's developing sense of identity. It is the result of cognitive processes that lead to an understanding of the self as a separate being that can act upon the world. In his writings more than 100 years ago, William James (1890) linked the sense of agency with the self-awareness that emerges in the first year of life; the self as 'I', otherwise called the subjective self, is the infant's first realisation that s/he exists as a separate being that can control his or her own actions and can make things happen. In Childhood Studies agency is seen as an inherent, inborn property that human beings have (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

Drawing upon the writings of phenomenology, our minds are always engaged with the world; our everyday experience is always and by definition intentional (Merleau Ponty, 1962). All of the mind's activities have a purpose; they are intentional (Kockelmans, 1967). This suggests that the ability to engage with the world in deliberate and purposeful ways, to intend towards its structures, is inborn, an inherent aspect of our existence.

Merleau Ponty (1962) makes a distinction between two types of intentionality: intentionality of acts refers to all of the explicit actions, behaviours and interactions that aim at the achievement of a predefined and recognisable target. The second type may be more difficult to detect. Operative intentionality is 'felt', rather than explicitly known; it is pre-reflective, pre-thematic and guides our actions (Papadopoulou & Birch, 2009). Operative intentionality appears to be the 'drive', the battery that informs our volitions and sets our goals in the first place.

It thus appears that there is a fundamental relationship between one's awareness of self (as a separate, unique being) and having agency. Operative intentionality, as an inherent characteristic of beings, seems to be at the core of children's agency, the latter expressed through intentional acts. Children's intentionalities and agency, however, do not exist in a vacuum.

Agency, as the capacity to do things in the world (Oswell, 2012) appears to be an inherent characteristic of life. Children are thus seen as individuals with the capacity to act in the world, as beings in their own right. Lee (2001), however, warns us that seeing children as *beings* (with agentic capacity) implies that agency is conditional upon independence and autonomy, an unmediated characteristic of individuals, a given that does not require any further exploration. This leads to the next paradox:

Paradox 4: agency and independence

The participatory narrative sees children as *beings*, not *becomings*, with a 'voice' of their own that assumingly exists independently of adult voices. Seeing agency as an expression of being and conditional upon independence and autonomy assumes that childhood, as a social category, can exist independently of adulthood. It also presupposes that the children who are given a 'voice' possess agency (as beings). In these terms, agency, self-possession, independence and maturity seem to be closely related.

In this essentialist reading of agency, participatory research would enable a full and undisclosed knowledge of children's perspectives. Agency is viewed as a portable and fixed quality that children will demonstrate once they are given the participatory 'space'. There is a widespread misconception that children's agentic action enables them to create their own 'spaces' and these are somehow independent from adult spaces (Manion, 2007). The context and conditions of children's participation, however, can never be independent and separated from adults' and the mainstream culture, or else the wider structures that children inhabit.

Indeed, seeing children's agency as existing independently of that of adults leads to the simplistic picture of binaries, which, as we have already discussed, overlooks the complexity of interdependencies between the two groups (Lee, 2001). Agentic independence can only emerge through patterns of dependency. Rather than an individual's possession, agency is seen as the emergent property of networks of others, of spaces, conditions, opportunities and resources (Lee, 2001).

In Oswell's (2012: 4) terms,

children's capacities to speak, act and become disclosed in particular social, natural and technological contexts have been dependent on their being

networked, assembled or infrastructured with other persons and things in such ways as to endow them with powers, which they alone could never hold or use.

Agency then cannot be seen as a labelling of possession, or the result of individual reflexivity, but rather as emerging from and always embedded in socio-cultural, temporal and relational structures. Structures can be material, such as the physical space, resources and curricula, to name a few. Or they can be historically constituted, such as the relationships between adults and children, teachers and pupils, and vary across different times and places (Siry *et al.*, 2016). The relationship between agency and structure is dialectical and mutually constitutive: structures can support, facilitate or constrain agency. Similarly, agentic actions can reinforce, or challenge and transform structures (Siry *et al.*, 2016).

Children's agency can only be understood in the context of childhood as a structural form (Oswell, 2012). Children's engagement with their world as social actors does not create the world anew. It finds itself in a given context, acts within certain conditions, makes use of its resources. The social order creates opportunities and possibilities and makes certain forms of agentic action possible in the first place. Therefore structure is always present as the horizon of human action and agency. Social actors (children in our instance) can have an influence and some sense of control over aspects of the structures they experience; they can and do challenge aspects of the social order. However, the structure pre-exists and makes agency possible in the first place.

Agency, thus, is not a portable, fixed property that can be transported and demonstrated in different structures. It emerges, dynamically evolves and is always embedded in its context. Agency should thus be seen as a socially constructed relation between the individual's intentions and the perceived opportunities or limitations to take action in a given structure (Hilppö *et al.*, 2016).

Paradox 5: socially mediated agency

As human beings, we have the inherent disposition to engage with our worlds. However, this human engagement takes shape and expresses itself in various ways in a network of relationships and power structures. Agency emerges in dependency (Lee, 2001); it is socially mediated (Oswell, 2012).

In this sense, it is paradoxical to see children's 'voices' as pure and authentic, as an entity, a finished product that individual children 'possess' and can demonstrate when invited. Children's agency and research input are socially mediated throughout the participatory research process, from beginning to end; they are co-supporters (Bergström *et al.*, 2010).

The expectation that children will generate knowledge about themselves is misguided as it assumes that knowledge is free from power (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) and independently constituted by a particular age group (in this instance, the children themselves). Yet the participatory agenda is largely influenced by the adults who decide about the rules of the participatory 'game' and what counts as participation. To use Freire's (1970) 'banking' metaphor, this participatory exercise involves 'depositing' in children the adult knowledge, skills and a political consciousness necessary in order to enable them to act as political actors with freedom and agency.

According to Roberts (2017: 143) ‘there is doubt about the extent to which the voices that are heard in participatory research are really, genuinely the children’s voices, rather than sanitised by adults and used more as decoration than illumination’.

Children may experience participation in very different ways, depending on their intentionalities and agendas. Some of the children’s behaviours may be seen (by adults) as more ‘participatory’ than others; yet they are all ways of engaging and taking some form of action within a given, participatory, structure.

Indeed, the children involved in our research engaged in different ways that were reflective of individual agendas. They assumed different roles, undertook different forms of action and expressed their agencies in variable ways. Some of these agendas were more sympathetic to our participatory aims, whereas others resisted, questioned, even threatened our adult, participatory ‘norms’. The danger of the participatory narrative is that in setting norms of ‘appropriate’ forms of action, it creates an expectation that children should participate in certain ways but not others. This conflicts with the emancipatory agenda of the participatory narrative, as our study shows.

Methodology

Aims and design

The aim of this study was to facilitate research-by-children. This is a type of participatory research where children are afforded the role of the researcher; they design and direct their own research, from its conception to dissemination (Thomas, 2017). The aim of this design was to emancipate children to generate their own unique, valuable and original contributions to knowledge.

The two adult academics (and authors of this paper) designed a research skills training course that involved a step-by-step guide to teaching children the different stages of the research process, from the initial stage of choosing a topic to the dissemination of findings. Our intention was to enable children to make all of the research decisions. Our research workshops, that stretched over two months, included a series of activities and some adult input. We drew on the principles of discovery learning (Bruner, 1966) where opportunities for learning emerge in problem-solving situations.

This study does not present the outcomes of the research that the children generated. The latter are presented in another publication. Here we include the findings of our reflections on the process. In other words, the methodology, findings and discussions here refer to another layer of our participatory engagement—our (adults’ and children’s) reflections on the process of sharing this participatory space.

Setting, participants, access and ethics

Our study took place in a primary school in South London. The children were in Year 6 (10–11 years old). In accordance with BERA’s (2011) ethical guidelines, we sought informed consent from all gatekeepers, the school staff and the parents. In line with safeguarding policies and our adult duty to protect children, we ensured that children were never left

unattended and were not put at any risk whilst working with us. Once initial approval from the head teacher was gained and parental consent letters were returned, we were invited to a school assembly to present our ideas to the children and school staff. We explained our aims, role, the duration of the study and the roles that the children would play, but also what we hoped we would achieve—gaining the children’s views and support theming to generate their own research about issues that mattered to them. We also explained that the children would have the opportunity to disseminate their findings to different audiences.

We informed the children that they had the right to withdraw at any time, without having to explain their reasons, and that we would maintain confidentiality and anonymity unless they disclosed a situation that posed risks to their well-being (Alderson, 2004). We clarified that participation was voluntary and our role was to support them, rather than ‘teach’ them. We asked that volunteers write their names on a paper and give it to us.

Some of the teachers offered to help us choose the ‘right’ children. One teacher, in particular, warned us that some children would be perfectly suited to participate in this study, whereas other would not. This judgement was not based on the children’s (lack of) academic competence but rather behavioural issues. As that teacher said, we had to be careful with our selection of children, otherwise the study would be jeopardised by children who refused to cooperate.

This was the first adult ‘filter’ (Kellett, 2009) that we experienced. In line with our participatory principles we decided not to exclude any of the children who wanted to take part. Twelve children volunteered, with an equal spread of gender (six boys and six girls). We did not know anything else about the background of the children, apart from the fact that they were of mixed academic ability, as their teacher told us.

Most of the children approached us in groups of peers, apart from one girl who came on her own. We gave children the option to work either on their own or in their friendship groups. All but one (the girl who came on her own) chose to be with their peers. Their working groups were thus self-selected, apart from the girl who worked on her own. We (the adults) felt that giving children the freedom to decide about their ways of engaging with this study would be motivating and empowering.

Methods

We used four methods to examine participants’ thoughts about this shared experience: questionnaires and interviews with the children and semi-participant observations and reflections of the adults. This part of the data collection process was designed by the adult researchers. The children were invited to discuss their experiences with us, if they wished. All of the children in our study were willing to contribute their insights.

At the end of the study the children filled in a questionnaire with a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions asking them to rate their experience, consider what they liked best or least, and the reasons for this, and consider what could be improved in the future to make this research more effective. This was designed by us (the adults).

They children were also invited to discuss their experiences in an informal, semi-structured interview with one of the adult researchers. The interview questions were also about the

experience of participating in the study, but open enough to enable the children to reflect on any aspects that we (the adults) had not considered.

In addition to the children's reflections, the two adult researchers kept observational notes and a reflective journal throughout the research process. The two of us met after each session to 'compare notes', discuss and evaluate our experiences of the session, reflect on what had worked well, but also on the issues that we found unexpected, challenging or in some way complex—the critical incidents (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

Being reflexive of our status as adults and our role and position in the setting was a methodological necessity (Christensen & James, 2017). It enabled us to scrutinise our theoretical framework and assumptions whilst at the same time considering our place, presence and impact upon the research study.

The tensions between (our) adult agendas and those of the children resurfaced on several occasions in our encounters with the children and with the school, to the extent that these became topical in our data analysis. The following section presents a thematic analysis of the different agendas that were at play during the research process.

Findings

The children's agendas

For this type of analysis, we identified common patterns of behaviours and interactions that suggested the different agendas behind children's action. These were based on our observational data and reflective logs and were grouped under the following themes.

Becoming an 'author'

Some of the children were excited about the prospect of having their work presented to different audiences and published. One child was particularly interested in the possibility of 'getting published' in the local newspaper. He often used this to motivate some of his peers to stay on task. In one instance, when some of his peers wanted to stop our work in order to rehearse for the school play, he said to them: 'Look, is it more important to be in a school play or to write an article that will be published in a newspaper and to present your own work?' Other child researchers often asked details about the newspaper that we would publish their work in or how we were going to find them to invite them to the conference (as this was the end of summer term and children would then move on to secondary school). This agenda helped motivate some of the children, some of the time, to engage with the task at hand.

Peer relationships

The prospect of working on a project with peers seemed to be the overriding agenda for some of the participants and the research space was often used as a site for peer socialisation. Peer dynamics, thus, became a predominant feature in the duration of this study. Working in a group made children assume different roles. These were not always fixed and consistently demonstrated by the same children; the ways peer groups interacted often varied depending on the activity of focus, day, timing of the study and tiredness.

Peer dynamics also influenced the children's engagement in less direct ways. The possibility of collecting data from other children was exciting to some child researchers but threatening to others. Indeed, some of the young researchers were anxious about presenting their work to their peers (at assembly) because, as one child put it, 'they will all laugh at me'.

Job share and fairness

Working in peer groups posed its own challenges. Some groups shared work more effectively than others. One of the peer groups in particular seemed to have tensions over work distribution. One of the group members assumed responsibility and was evidently committed to completing the task effectively and on time. The other two members seemed to not be as interested in completing their research. They did not contribute much; sometimes chose to stay in the playground and joined us much later, or attended but did not engage. The child that was doing most of the work was feeling frustrated by his peers' lack of engagement as the following extract shows:

Child A:(speaking to one of the adult researchers): Done! I've finished my analysis. I did it on my own. Did you know? B. and C. (names of the other two peers) have not helped at all. I did it myself. Child B: Yes I did, I helped. I chose the colour for the charts. I have added this (showing the graphs on the paper). Child C: I thought of questions 2 and 6. I helped a lot. Child A: No you didn't. I did most of it. You were out playing football yesterday and I came in here first to get started. It's not fair to have your names on this work. It's my work.

Similar exchanges were common in this peer group. This often led to ongoing arguments that led to our (adult) intervention.

Co-operation vs. resistance

Our ways of working together were discussed, negotiated and agreed from the beginning. In the process, however, we all shifted from our initial commitments. Sometimes, children seemed to know what they had to do, were focused, assumed responsibility and motivated each other to complete their work. At other times, some young researchers were reluctant to complete their work, uncertain about their interest in it, distracted, unmotivated, disruptive and unwilling to cooperate. Some young researchers often refused to come to the class to work and chose to stay in the playground, or came to the class late. In one instance, some children decided to leave because they wanted to rehearse for the school play and they deemed this more important. At times some children refused to work or let others in the group do the work for them.

One group of children, in particular, often engaged in behaviours that appeared to be ridiculing (adult) authority. The two children in this group alternated in making jokes, pretending to be the adult researchers (us), repeating our words in a squeaky voice, standing up and running around the classroom, pushing each other, dancing, laughing, and so on. When reminded that they did not have to be there, they would stop the disruption, but this was short lived. They would soon revert to their previous behaviours. It soon became evident to us (the adults) that this was an attempt to challenge the adult agendas and impose their own. Such behaviours also challenged our self-perceptions of our role as facilitators. This will be discussed later.

Our (adult) agenda (based on our reflections on critical incidents)

With the emancipatory agenda of participation in mind, we planned a study that gave children opportunities to make decisions about all of the stages of the research process. We envisaged our role as being responsive to the children's views, interests and ideas. This involved stepping back and allowing the children to take responsibility and assume control.

However, this emancipatory agenda was often threatened. There were several incidents where we felt it was necessary to assume our adult responsibility and control. Our adult status and role, our duty to protect children and to establish and maintain the 'norms' of this shared project meant that we often had to adopt a more authoritarian tone that clearly challenged the principles of participatory research.

There were times when we felt that our duty to safeguard children clashed with the empowering ethos of our study. In one instance, when two of the boys did not attend our session, one of us (adult researcher) had to go to the playground to look for them. On another instance another group of children asked whether they could have some time off to go out and play (unattended). At times like these we felt that our adult duty to protect children had to override the participatory atmosphere and freedom of choice that we were trying to convince them they had.

We often had to remind the children of the deadlines, of the task at hand, of the need to concentrate. We had discussions about the 'rules' of working together, such as sharing work and helping each other. We also found it necessary to remind some children that they had made a decision to be there and they could go if they changed their minds. When trying to address disruptive behaviours we also found ourselves assuming a disciplinarian tone and 'warning' children that unless they followed the 'rules', they would have to leave.

Such critical incidents exposed the competing agendas at play. At times it seemed that being a facilitator is in conflict with being an adult, or being a *responsible* adult in a *school environment*. This will be discussed later.

The children's reflections

When invited to reflect upon the process and make suggestions for further improvements, the children's responses fell into two categories. Some comments referred to their work and how they felt about their finished project. The children felt generally happy with their work and gave some ideas about how they could improve it further. The second, interesting category of responses referred to the relational and behavioural aspects of this study. The young participants felt that some of their peers (or themselves) did not behave as they should have, that they were often 'naughty' and 'silly'. When asked why they thought this happened, the child researchers said that this was because we were not their teachers. As one child put it, 'If you were our teachers or the head teacher, no one would dare do what they did'.

When invited to make suggestions for future improvements, there was a general consensus that we (the adults) have to be stricter in the future. As one child put it, 'you have to tell naughty children off. Punish them if they misbehave.'

Discussion

All of the participants (children and adults) in this study shared a common research ‘space’. In this space we all brought our different agendas and this informed our behaviours and interactions—our intentional acts (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This space was negotiated, often challenged and continuously and dynamically evolving as the result of ongoing relationships and interactions with one another. In this sense it was a *relational* space (Manion, 2007), a space embedded in contextual and relational structures (Siry *et al.*, 2016).

The school context had an impact upon the ways that participants positioned themselves in relation to others. Indeed, the power relationships (Robinson & Kellett, 2004) and generational ordering (Mayall, 2000) embedded in the school environment were largely influential in our study. All participants, children and adults, positioned ourselves in relation to each another. Some of the children sometimes ‘tested’ our (adult-set) norms and boundaries, resisted our participatory ‘norms’ and attempted to control the agenda (Lukes, 2005). When invited to reflect on the process, they all positioned themselves (or their peers) as childish, in need of (adult) control and (adult) enforced discipline. Or else, they saw themselves as power-less in relation to us, as is often the case in educational environments. In Freirean terms (Freire, 1970), they assumed the role of the ‘oppressed’ that reflected on their experience through an adult lens.

At the same time, we (the adult researchers) were not quite as ‘adult like’ as their teachers and other adults in their lives. We looked like adults, but we were not their teachers and, as we explained to them from the outset, we were not there to discipline them. We invited, but did not force them to participate; we gave them choices and autonomy to make decisions. This worked sometimes, with some children, who were more willing to assume a more autonomous role. However, this (perhaps unfamiliar) relational space also caused confusion and uncertainty (Atkinson, 2019). At times they engaged in power struggles, as they tried to challenge our behavioural norms and expectations and to impose their own agendas. They saw us as less powerful than their teachers and the head teacher and their suggestion was that we should exercise more authority in the future.

The participatory space that we shared in this project was perhaps less ordinary compared with other contexts in the children’s lives. Perhaps it challenged the pre-established norms and power relationships commonly found in a school context. As such it caused uncertainty, not only to the children, but to the adult researchers too. Our interactions with each other were never power free. Despite our attempts to minimise our adult authority and control, our shared research environment was imbued with power in all of its dimensions (Lukes, 2005) and directions (Gallagher, 2008): from adults to children, from children to adults and from children to their peers.

In the duration of the study we (the adults) frequently resorted to more authoritarian, or ‘adult-like’ behaviours. We often felt compelled to assume control and manage disruptive behaviours, or to re-establish the norms and expectations of working together. We often acted as teachers, who reminded children of the task at hand, tried to keep them focused or managed their deadlines. It was, indeed, difficult at times to stay faithful to our initial commitment of empowering children and allowing them to set the agenda, especially if the latter conflicted with our (adult) agendas.

As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) have argued, despite our attempts to empower children and enable them to make all of the research decisions, the overall control and management of the study was adult led. Indeed, we designed the study, introduced the norms of appropriate (participatory) behaviours, set the targets and then invited children to participate. The participatory agenda was, to a large extent, shaped and controlled by us, the adults.

In this context, some of the children's behaviours were seen as sympathetic to our participatory ethos. Other behaviours, however, were seen as a challenge to our intentions and perhaps even as a threat to our adult authority. We tried to discourage such behaviours, despite the fact that these were reflective of some children's ways of engaging. By selectively reinforcing some kinds of engagement instead of others, we were paradoxically prioritising *our* participatory agenda over some of the children's agendas (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008).

The children in our study were all successful in completing their projects, presenting them and taking pride in them. In this sense our study met its aims and enabled the children to conduct research and disseminate it. However, we are less confident about the extent to which these should be claimed to be the children's (authentic) voices, rather than polished, constrained, filtered, interpreted and controlled by us. Children's agency is not the possession of individuals (Lee, 2001). It is always situated in and emergent from particular contexts, shaped by power relationships and socially mediated (Oswell, 2012).

Our encounters with the children in this research context shaped everybody's agentic action, the children's and ours. Our agencies emerged from certain structures. These included the educational environment, with its own ethos, the participatory ideological framework and our roles as adults and as children, but also the more personal, immediate relationships between the children and the adults. These layers of relationships and power structures shaped, influenced and at times constrained our agentic action.

In this sense, it is paradoxical to speak of children's (and even adults') agency as a self-contained property that individuals hold and express if asked. As we have shown here, agency is socially mediated, embedded in webs of relationships and embedded in social structures imbued with power. Children's (and adults') agency should thus be viewed as a relational, dynamic engagement with the world, as emerging from dependence (Lee, 2001). It is imbued by power relationships in the sense that it is shaped by power structures, but it also resists and challenges them.

To conclude, the aim of our study has been to highlight some of the paradoxes that arise from the participatory discourse. Unless challenged, these can lead to simplistic, naive or even tokenistic claims about the authenticity of children's voice. This does not mean that we reject the ethical, epistemological and ontological values of participatory research. Rather, we should endeavour to support children in engaging with the research process, but remain alert to and continuously reflect upon the complexities, tensions and power struggles that exist, rather than glossing over them.

This participatory space is a deeply political arena where all participants (adults and children alike) engage in co-construction of meanings and negotiation of goals, of norms and the sharing of power. This is the type of engagement that Freire would term 'praxis'.

References

- Ahearn, L.M. (2001) Language and agency, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 109–137.
- Alderson, P. (2004) Ethics, in: S. Frazer & V. Lewis (Eds) *Doing research with children and young people* (London, Sage), 97–112.
- Atkinson, C. (2019) Ethical complexities in participatory childhood research: Rethinking the ‘least’ adult role, *Childhood*, 26(2), 186–201.
- Bergström, K., Jonsson, L. & Shanahan, H. (2010) Children as co-researchers voicing their preferences in foods and eating: Methodological reflections, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 34, 183–189.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Available online at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchersresources/publications/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2011> (accessed: 10 July 2018).
- Bruner, J. (1966) *Toward a theory of instruction* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press).
- Christensen, P. & James, A. (2017) Researching children and childhood: Cultures of communication, in: P. Christensen & A. James (Eds) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (Oxon, Routledge), 1–10.
- Christensen, P. & Prout, A. (2005) Anthropological and sociological perspectives on the study of children, in: S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds) *Researching children’s experience. Approaches and methods*. (London, Sage), 42–60.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2018) *Research methods in education* (London, Routledge).
- Davies, H. (2017) Researching children’s complex family lives and respecting inter-generational relationships, in: P. Christensen & A. James (Eds) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (London, Routledge), 87–103.
- Frazer, S. (2004) Situating empirical research, in: S. Frazer & V. Lewis (Eds) *Doing research with children and young people* (London, Sage), 15–26.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (London, Penguin Books).
- Gallacher, L.A. & Gallagher, M. (2008) Methodological immaturity in childhood research? Thinking through ‘participatory methods’, *Childhood*, 15(4), 499–516.
- Gallagher, M. (2008) ‘Power is not an evil’: Rethinking power in participatory methods, *Children’s Geographies*, 6(2), 137–150.
- Greene, S. & Hill, M. (2005) Researching children’s experience: Methods and methodological issues, in: S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds) *Researching children’s experience. Approaches and methods*. (London, Sage), 1–21.
- Hart, R.A. (1997) *Children’s participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care* (London, Earthscan).
- Hilppö, J., Lipponen, L., Kumpulainen, K. & Virlander, M. (2016) Sense of agency and everyday life: Children’s perspective, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 10, 50–59.
- Holloway, S.L., Holt, L. & Mills, S. (2019) Questions of agency: Capacity, subjectivity, spatiality and temporality, *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(3), 458–477.
- Hunleth, J. (2011) Beyond on or with: Questioning power dynamics and knowledge production in ‘child-oriented’ research methodology, *Childhood*, 18(1), 81–93.
- James, W. (1890) *The principles of psychology* (New York, Henry Holt and Company).
- James, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. (1998) *Theorising childhood* (Cambridge, MA, Polity Press).
- Kellett, M. (2009) Children as researchers: What we can learn from them about the impact of poverty on literacy opportunities? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(4), 395–408.

- Kim, C.Y. (2017) Participation or pedagogy? Ambiguities and tensions surrounding the facilitation of children as researchers, *Childhood*, 24(1), 84–98.
- Kockelmans, J. (Ed) (1967) *Phenomenology. The philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its interpretation* (New York, Doubleday and Company Inc.).
- Le Borgne, C. & Tisdall, E.K.M. (2017) Children's participation: Questioning competence and competencies? *Social Inclusion*, 5, 122–130.
- Lee, N. (2001) *Childhood and society. Growing up in an age of uncertainty* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power. A radical view* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan).
- Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising article 12 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 929–942.
- Manion, G. (2007) Going spatial going relational: Why "listening to children" and children's participation needs reframing, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3), 405–420.
- Mayall, B. (2000) Conversations with children: Working with generational issues, in: P. Christensen & A. James (Eds) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (London, Routledge Falmer), 120–135.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of perception* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Montreuil, M. & Carnevale, F.A. (2016) A concept analysis of children's agency within the health literature, *Journal of Child Health Care*, 20(4), 503–511.
- Oswell, D. (2012) *The agency of children: From family to global human rights* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Papadopoulou, M. & Birch, R. (2009) 'Being in the world': The event of learning, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41, 270–286.
- Prout, A. & James, A. (2000) A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems, in: A. James & A. Prout (Eds) *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (Basingstoke, Falmer Press), 145–164.
- Roberts, H. (2017) Listening to children: And hearing them, in: P. Christensen & A. James (Eds) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (Oxon, Routledge), 142–159.
- Robinson, C. & Kellett, M. (2004) Power, in: S. Frazer & V. Lewis (Eds) *Doing research with children and young People* (London, Sage), 81–96.
- Siry, C., Wilmes, S.E.D. & Haus, J.M. (2016) Examining children's agency within participatory structures in primary science investigations, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 10, 4–16.
- Thomas, N. (2017) Turning the tables: Children as researchers, in: P. Christensen & A. James (Eds) *Research with children. Perspectives and practices* (Oxon, Routledge), 160–179.
- United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (New York, United Nations).