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# 'I enjoyed it because...you could do whatever you wanted and be creative': three principles for participatory research and pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

The complexity of many children's lives can result in their ideas being neither understood nor included in mainstream opportunities for learning, particularly children who are living with disadvantage. With a focus on developing ethical and inclusive principles for participatory research and pedagogy, this paper reports on a pilot project where we worked with young, hard-to-reach individuals across four sites in England to enable them to design and carry out research about their experiences and views of disadvantage. Here, we present snapshots of the young participants' choices of research topics and methods, which reflected their own lives and interests, and led to powerful visualizations of the complexity of child and youth disadvantage. Reflecting back on the project, we discuss effective ways to initiate and sustain participatory research that can enable young researchers to be involved as active and empowered agents at every stage of the research process. We also consider the implications for developing participatory pedagogy, with researchers working alongside educators to create school cultures that foster belonging and genuinely support all students' expertise and ways of knowing by looking beyond the school buildings and into their lives in the wider community.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## INTRODUCTION

I enjoyed it because...you could do whatever you wanted and be creative at the same time you don't need to ask someone to speak like it's not like this person's not letting you be creative like you've gotta listen and you know it just continues and continues...like people telling you to like they give you commands to do something for them and they wouldn't stop (Rafiq, aged 9)

This was 9-year-old Rafiq's comment on her involvement in a recent participatory research study, where we worked creatively with children and young people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage to develop flexible, responsive and respectful ways of including their views and values in participatory research. Funded by the charitable organization Lankelly Chase,<sup>1</sup> the study was devised as a pilot, with the goal of building authentic and robust participatory research procedures that could inform a larger-scale project to be rolled out to a wider population. In this pilot project, we approached hard-to-reach 7- to 21 year-old participants through educational, therapy and arts-based partner organizations that work with children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

We adapted our research approach to the practices that we encountered in each of the four partner organizations, working in ways that suited their existing patterns of contact with children and young people. In each setting, we provided opportunities for participants to try out established research methods using a range of conventional and digital technologies, and to experiment with new ways of portraying their own perspectives, using resources and methods of their own choosing. The project was built on three guiding principles:

1. to develop and sustain relationships with young, hard-to-reach individuals;
2. to enable participants to be involved as active and empowered agents in every stage of the research process;
3. to work with young researchers to train and mentor them in research techniques, impact and outreach work including the design, piloting and evaluation of a series of participatory research approaches that would generate authentic visualizations of the complexity of child and youth disadvantage.

Many of the young participants we worked with were struggling to balance the demands of education with the challenges, responsibilities and insecurities that flowed through their personal lives, and could be

described as experiencing what Bauman (2000, 2) refers to as the 'liquid modernity' of contemporary life. That is, their lives were characterized by fragmentation, flux and unsettlement, rather than by the more settled and privileged continuities of 'solid modern' social-structural positions (2). For example, some participants were young carers who bore responsibility for their parent(s) or sibling(s) well-being, some were experiencing unstable home lives due to family break-up, parental unemployment, separation, itinerancy and/or migration, and many were living in relative poverty. Through our conversations with the young participants, we learnt that for some, school offered a (relative) haven of stability, whereas others felt alienated from the learning objectives and assessments they encountered in school or college, which seemed remote from the realities and prospects of their own lives. A major challenge for the interdisciplinary research team was therefore to work collaboratively with individual or teams of young participants – depending on their preferences – in ways that enabled their perspectives to take centre stage, for them to lead and design studies on topics of their own choosing, and to experiment with different ways of representing and sharing their findings with peers, families, teachers and wider communities. As Rafiqa's words suggest, the young participants valued this opportunity to investigate the realities of their own lives in ways that were meaningful to them.

We begin this paper by situating our project in contemporary work on participatory research with young people, and present our sociocultural conceptualization of 'voice' as situated in particular interaction frameworks that render certain voices less or more audible (Maybin 2013). Focussing on data from two of the four research sites, we introduce the participants and outline the range of research projects they undertook. We then focus on our methodological approach, where establishing and sustaining trusting relationships with the young researchers lay at the heart of our endeavour. We describe the iterative and recursive choice-making processes that enabled the young participants to make informed, reflective choices about the issues and research methods they explored, and we problematize the ethical and methodological tensions we encountered between our own research aims and those of the young researchers. We conclude by considering the value of our approach for developing principles for participatory pedagogy, and we explore how researchers might work with educators to create school cultures that foster belonging and genuinely support all students' positive identification as learners by looking beyond the stability of the school buildings and into the fluidity of their lives in the wider community.

## A BRIEF TRAJECTORY OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The inclusion of children's perspectives in social research has gained increasing attention over the past two decades, with suggestions that participatory approaches constitute a new paradigm for twenty-first century research (Kellett 2005). The move towards foregrounding children's 'voices' reflects a broader growth in rights-based principles such as those encapsulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989). Informed largely by anthropological, sociological and ethnographic research, but also reflecting predominantly Western, liberal assumptions about childhood, UNCRC reflects a broader trend in theorizing childhood, often referred to as the 'new sociology of childhood', which explores the relational and situated nature of children's lives (Tisdall and Punch 2012). Work in this field has helped to establish the position of children in the research process as agentic, active and knowledgeable social actors who can offer unique insights into their own lives and the worlds in which they live (e.g. Corsaro 2005; Levine and New 2008; Prout and Tisdall 2006). This focus on children as active research participants builds on a longer history of critical sociology and critical ethnography research investigating the often silenced voices of marginalized 'Others', which has exposed how unequal power relations in education work to ensure the status quo of unequal opportunity is reproduced through the mechanisms of state schooling. A seminal example is Willis (1977) ethnographic study of twelve (self-named) 'working class lads' (4) in secondary education, which showed how the 'lads' resisted the aspirational pathways to social mobility that schooling purported to offer them, and retained their spirit as political and social rebels, yet in so doing, sealed their destinies into low-wage employment. Although critiqued for romanticizing the boys' resistance (Arnot 2004), and for neglecting female and race-related aspects of disadvantage (McFarland and Cole 1988), Willis' work had a profound impact on subsequent studies of the complexity of social relations and inequalities in education.

There is however, an ocean of difference between the role of an ethnographic researcher interpreting children's perspectives through observation and interview, and that of a researcher seeking to enable children to conduct their own research – and each of these research journeys requires very different navigational skills. As the comparatively new field of participatory research develops, social researchers have encountered many ethical, methodological, theoretical and practical challenges in including participant voice throughout the research process in ways that consistently foreground equality, insight and respect (Alderson 2008; Christensen and James 2008). One central issue is the problematic concept of 'voice', which encompasses the dual aspects of the 'freedom to develop a voice worth hearing' and

'freedom to have one's voice heard' (Hymes 1996, 64). 'Voice' can also mask 'the dialogic dynamics of children's voices and the sociocultural features shaping their emergence' (Maybin 2013, 383), including factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, language heritage etc, the situation where the voice is encountered (school, home, community), the nature of the interaction and the role relationships between adults and child. Relationships of power and influence are central to the performance of voice: with the adult/teacher/researcher as potentially more powerful than the child/learner/young research participant, particularly when researching the lives of marginalized participants who may have grown accustomed to their voices being ignored. Equally, power relations are complex and subject to change within participant groups (Arnot and Reay 2007). As Morgan and Sengedorj suggest, voices are 'not fixed but are fluid, performatively produced and multi-faceted in nature' (2015, 202). The balance of power may shift and develop across time and place, and research participants can wield power by opting for silence, absence or dissent. Participation in research always unfolds within dynamic and evolving power relationships that determine what is said, what is yet to be voiced and what is left unspoken.

This conceptualization of voice as dialogic reflects sociocultural theorization that identity, power and culture sit at the heart of learning (Wertsch 1991). From this perspective, meaning-making does not occur in isolation 'inside' the human mind but meanings are distributed and 'integrally intertwined with culture, history, location, and emotion' (Lancaster and Flewitt 2015, 139). Culture also provides humans with particular tools and resources to mediate their thinking, and these cultural resources change and develop over time. Working in this sociocultural framework, we encouraged the young social actors in this project to explore their expertise through cultural resources of their choosing, and consistently valued their experiences and views as 'pedagogical assets' to inform their research (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Moll and Gonzalez 1997). Placing high value on learners' expertise from their personal life worlds can turn around deficit views of disadvantaged students (Comber and Kamler 2004) and offer an alternative pedagogic framework to the dominant power-elite cultural capital that prevails in contemporary schooling. All too often in education institutions, non-elite families and communities are situated as 'places from which children must be saved or rescued, rather than places that, in addition to problems (as in all communities), contain valuable knowledge and experiences that can foster educational development' (Moll and Gonzalez 1997, 98).

However, we were mindful of the processes of change that can occur when students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) are recontextualised in the curriculum and in pedagogy (Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam 2012). We also recognized that although the importance of young people's participation in research may be valued in principle, there is still a 'gap between the high tide of rhetoric of participation and the low tide of effective delivery of improved services for those most socially excluded' (Badham 2004, 153).

## METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH WITH 'HARD-TO-REACH' YOUNG PEOPLE

A driving force behind the design of our approach was the belief that children and young people are knowledgeable and agentic social actors who are experts in their own lives, yet their expertise is often rendered inaudible by more powerful and often dissonant voices that rein in on their lives in school, at home and in the wider community. Our methodological goal was therefore to develop ways of working that could begin to alleviate some of these tensions. Underpinned by the three principles outlined in the Introduction, our research questions were:

1. What are effective ways to develop and sustain relationships with young, hard-to-reach individuals that enables them to document and report on their own lives?
2. How can participants be involved as active and empowered agents in every stage of the process?
3. What are effective ways to work with child and youth co-researchers to design, pilot and evaluate participatory research approaches that lead to innovative impact and outreach work?

### *Partner organizations and sample*

Our focus in this project was on developing ways of conducting research with young individuals who may be 'hard-to-reach' or excluded from conventional routes to research participation. We understood 'exclusion' as meaning that the complexity of individuals' experiences and ideas are neither understood nor included in processes that affect policy and the design of services that should be available to them (Jones 2009; Jones and Welch 2010). To gain access to this cohort, we approached organizations that had established relationships and ways of working with young people experiencing disadvantage, and could offer individual support to participants, if needed. A second aim in working with partner organizations was to attempt to break away from the communicative contexts of educational institutions and their interactional principles that regulate 'the selection, organization, sequencing, criteria and pacing of communication (oral/written/visual) together with the position, posture and dress of communicants' (Bernstein 1990, 34).

Given the exploratory nature of this pilot, we purposively selected four very different partner organizations: a family therapy group working with 'Broadham' primary school in inner London; an established youth empowerment project situated in a large housing estate in 'Ranfield', a city in northern England; the community-based performing arts centre 'CleanSheet', located in an innercity area of deprivation in 'Newbridge' in north-west England; and the youth organization 'Streetscene' supporting young homeless people in outer London. Through these organizations we sought volunteer participants aged 7–11 years in Broadham (4 participants); 11–13 years in Ranfield (8 Participants); 7–12 years in Newbridge (15 participants); and 16–18 years in Streetscene (3 participants). Given the fluid, diverse and dynamic nature of the communities with which we were working, we adopted Gutiérrez and Rogoff's (2003, 21) definition of a community as:

...a coordinated group of people with some traditions and understandings in common...with varied roles and practices and continual change among participants as well as transformations in the community's practices.

This definition moves away from the assumption that communities share common affinities based on geography, race, class or ethnicity and recognizes that people live culture 'in a mutually constitutive manner' (Gutiérrez and Rogoff 2003, 21). Nonetheless, there was some continuity in the materiality of each site (the organization of people, the presence or absence of particular tools and texts, the valued channels of communication) which reflected the structural dynamics of each participating organization (Dyson 2013). We worked for varying lengths of time in each setting, in tune with each partner organization's ways of working and with the young people's busy schedules.

### *Research team and reflexivity*

We recognize the power differentials in research relationships and the tendency for research reporting to frame particular voices, eliciting some and not others (Arnot and Reay 2007). To mitigate these effects, we purposively developed an interdisciplinary research team, with 2–3 team members present in each research site, offering the academic perspectives of child rights, participatory arts practice, applied linguistics and cultural studies, and the professional perspectives of well-being practitioners, care and social workers. To make visible our own assumptions, we kept research diaries, and met regularly as a whole team to offer constructive reflection on process in each project site and pool ideas for project development.

A particular area of focus was our role as research mentors for the young participants, tasked with enabling them to explore their own perceptions and experiences of disadvantage in ways with which they were comfortable and which reflected their interests and concerns, rather than ours. This required developing mutually trusting relationships, and highly sensitive, responsive and flexible ways of working. In each site, the research mentors designed a range of creative activities with a view to opening up metaphorical spaces the child and youth participants could either step into or diverge from, in groups or on their own. As mentors we also fed participants' ideas back to them at the beginning of every session, encouraging a cyclical process of review and reflection. A key mentor task towards the end of each project was to enable participants to curate the information they had gathered, and to explore diverse ways in which they might produce visualizations of their work, for example, through traditional presentation formats such as PowerPoint, or more creative formats, such as through dance, performance, song or poetry. As a constant reference, we were guided by advice from a Youth Expert Panel Group established early in the project.

### *Youth expert panel*

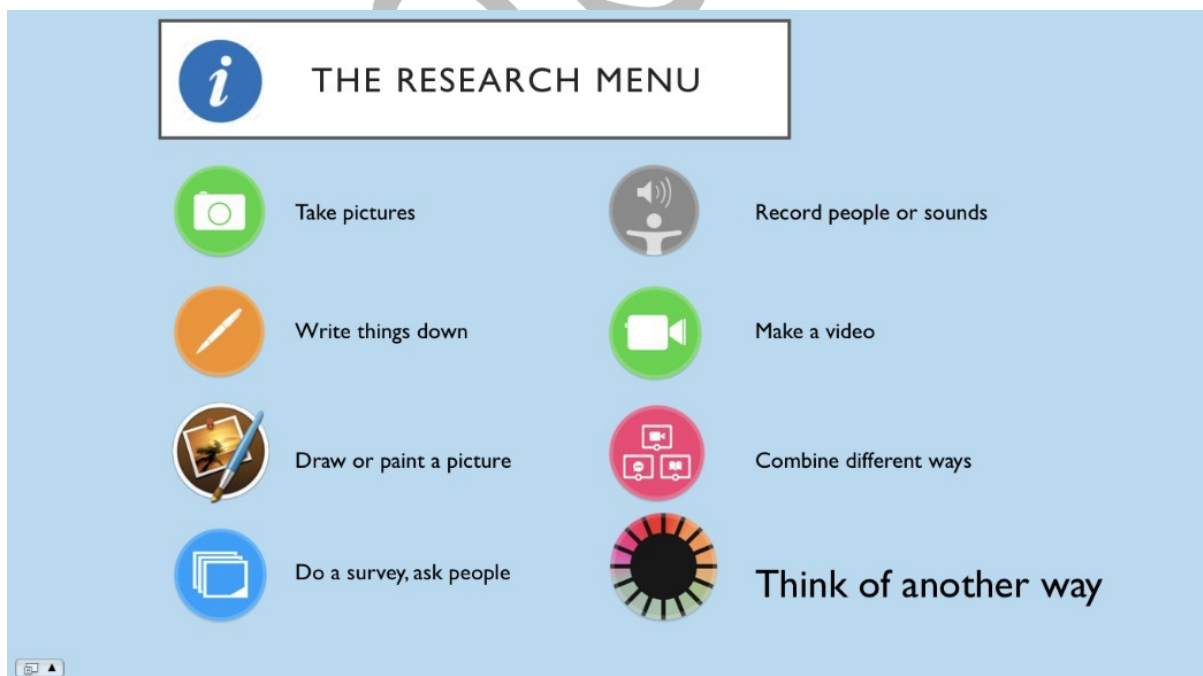
Moore et al. (2015) identify the use of reference groups as an effective way to gain different perspectives to those of researchers, and to advise on how researchers interact with young participants. In this vein, we invited young people who had previously conducted research with the partner organization in Ranfield to join a Reference Group, and eight 15–18 year-olds volunteered. This self-named 'Youth Expert Panel' (YEP) was facilitated by two research team members and met five times during the pilot, including two meetings with the wider project team and representatives of the project funder, Lankelly Chase. YEP considered the overall project aims, approach to content, ethical framework, how their ideas would be communicated to the young researchers and reflected in the pilot, and offered constructive critique of our progress across all four project sites. They emphasized the importance of using creative approaches including the stories of people from different backgrounds, the creation of fictitious characters to ensure confidentiality, and using visual methods and media that participants were familiar with. They advised us to use 'age-appropriate language', make the sessions enjoyable, and avoid being 'too serious', creating a 'victim mentality' or broaching 'overly sensitive' topics. YEP also clarified the need to signpost further information to participants who we might identify as requiring support, to be highly flexible in our approaches, to work in small groups and to make it clear that participants could withdraw at any time. Speaking from their own experiences, they reminded us that disadvantage may be hidden, comes in many forms and – regardless of age – participants might be unaware of their own disadvantage.

### Research process

Once the partner organizations had agreed to collaborate, we offered two to three information giving ‘taster sessions’ in each setting, inviting prospective participants with their carers/parents (where appropriate) and offering research-related, fun activities, tailored to each research site. Written consent was not sought until all participants and their parents/guardians had been given multiple opportunities to ask questions and request further information. Following YEP recommendations and in line with each partner organization’s ways of working, we then devised a series of research workshops offering enjoyable, creative, action- and arts-based activities, opportunities to talk 1:1, in pairs and larger groups, and prioritized participants’ emerging ideas on content and process. The workshops lasted 45–90 min, and all followed a similar structure, with: icebreaker/opening activities; reminders of work undertaken so far; discussion of workshop aims and planned activities as decided at the previous workshop; research-related activities; reflection on the workshop and collaborative forward planning. Research mentors made fieldnotes during each session, and photographs were taken by research mentors and participants, as a visual record of research activity.

Fieldnotes were shared and augmented by research mentors in reflective meetings after each session. Some activities were audio-recorded when the participants suggested this format. The taster sessions began with an exchange of knowledge, interests and skills, including a menu of possible research methods (see Figure 1) and activities to stimulate participants’ own ideas about collecting data. Throughout the research workshops, the young participants sensitized us as research mentors to their life experiences, and we enabled them to become familiar with research principles and procedures, and to experiment with using a range of research tools and media to explore and communicate their ideas. We encouraged the young researchers to explore potential topics for their research, offering advice and support as they designed and implemented their projects, recruited participants, and gathered and analysed data. Once the projects were complete, we discussed if/how they might like to share their research, and worked with them to create a menu of dissemination options. We subsequently helped them plan for dissemination events, including assembling family, community members, teachers, peers and national charities for presentations and exhibitions. Working with their choices for dissemination, we are currently extending the influence of their research to wider public engagement, including a series of events attended by local councillors, representatives from the mayoral office and members of parliament, with a view to bringing the young participants’ critical and creative perspectives on disadvantage to national bodies and policy makers.

Figure 1. Research menu



### Ethics

Considerable time was invested in planning for ethics, in consultation with the partner organizations, and in line with ethical procedures recommended by UCL IOE and BERA (2011). Particular attention was paid to issues relating to research with marginalized participants (Pain and Francis 2003). All members of the

research team had Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and were familiarized with the host organizations' policies concerning safeguarding and child protection. Information giving and consent processes varied according to participant age, and the host settings' ways of working with choice. Care was taken to ensure no pressure was placed on children and young people to participate, and participants' consent was considered provisional upon our work continuing to develop within their expectations (Flewitt 2005). We responded flexibly to the logistical challenges of scheduling research sessions, in an effort to ensure that participants' lives were not unduly moulded to fit our research agenda (Mannion 2007).

Multiple, problem-solving activities were undertaken to familiarize participants with the rigours and necessity of research ethics, including the use of pseudonyms, which are used for all participants and research sites reported in this paper. Clear structures were in place for participants and researchers to approach named individuals in the partner organization if any ethical issues arose. These structures were invaluable throughout the fieldwork, particularly when children mentioned aspects of their lives outside school that they were struggling to understand. For example, in one activity where children named their favourite colour, one girl stated fervently 'I hate black'. Later on, while working 1:1 with a mentor, she asked if the mentor wanted to know why she hated black, and volunteered that she had no bed at home and all her family's clothes and possessions were being kept in black bin liners since her family had been moved from furnished to unfurnished social housing. She was worried her friends might ask to come home with her as they used to, and did not want them to know how she was living. Another young child repeatedly mentioned his confusion at being separated from immediate family and being placed in the care of a guardian. These issues were too raw to be shared with their classmates, but the children gave us permission to mention their concerns to specialist members of the school staff, who in turn worked with each child and family to help ameliorate the child's concerns. Whilst never part of their 'research projects' these private conversations between children and mentors became an extremely important aspect of our work, and bore testament to the power of creating trusting relationships and non-judgemental spaces where children living with complex disadvantage felt secure and able to articulate their personal views and feelings.

### THREE PRINCIPLES FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

The child and youth projects were highly diverse, ranging from questionnaire-based studies on issues that reflected the interests of small or large groups of students, to individual and collaborative creative expression of identity through dance, film and the oral performance of poetry. Here, we focus on the findings of our pilot study regarding the three participatory research principles of developing and sustaining relationships with young, hard-to-reach individuals, enabling participants to be active and empowered agents in every stage of the research process; and training and mentoring them in research techniques, impact and outreach work. To illustrate how each principle was enacted in school settings, we feature 'snapshots' of research activity in Broadham Primary School, where the project was delivered as a summer term, after-school 'research club', and Ranfield Secondary School, where we worked with slightly older participants during school hours, over a period of two school terms.

#### *Developing and sustaining relationships with young, hard-to-reach individuals*

The following brief 'snapshots' exemplify how we developed mutually trusting relationships with participants, sustained by a pedagogical approach that fostered dialogue between research mentors and young participants. These snapshots include: exploring participants' understandings of research and technology; tailoring activities to affirm and reflect on participant knowledge and interests; and developing trust between mentors and participants by noting actions and making it clear how these had been acted on.

#### *Snapshot 1 exploring participant understandings of research and technology*

As part of our relationship-building ethos, we sought to ensure that research mentors and participants shared understandings of the pilot project aims. During the first taster session we asked what participants thought the term 'research' meant, with typical answers including: 'finding something out'; 'using something like Wikipedia, using books or asking people'; 'looking things up on the Web', with some recognition that sources on Wikipedia might 'not be true'. We also explored participants' technology use, with varied answers: some had access to tablets and Smart Phones at home, whilst some only had access to desk-top computers in school, with a single standard mobile phone owned by a parent/guardian at home. We linked the media the children reported using to the Research Menu (Figure 1), to clarify that there are always choices in research design, and that participants could choose 'traditional' research methods, and/or suggest their own novel ideas about how to collect information about their chosen research topic.

The following week, we reflected back on these activities, and brought digital audio recorders and iPads for participants to use in open-ended activities, such as taking and editing photographs or making short video

films in and around the buildings where we met, and using video editing software. We viewed short, youth advocacy films to analyse powerful uses of camera angles and shots that they could apply to their own work. Participants discussed how these activities could be used in research, which media they enjoyed using and why. Through this dialogue, reflection and action, participants suggested interviewing each other using digital recorders, iPads or Smartphones, asking peers and family to take photographs of things that matter to them, and writing blogs or vlogs (video blogs). Some children felt more comfortable using the digital devices than others, but all participated and greatly enjoyed developing technical and research skills.

*Snapshot 2: developing participants' research knowledge, and articulating ideas in their own terms*

The taster session activities prompted participants to talk about topics they might investigate, including their understandings of 'disadvantage'. For example, in Broadham the mentors took photographs of places in the area surrounding the host primary school, then printed and cut them up. Without mentioning their location, mentors asked the children to reassemble the pieces. Gradually, participants recognized local buildings, parks, market stalls, bus stops, and items (e.g. an abandoned freezer, overflowing bin liners) that littered the nearby streets. They began to talk about things they did/did not like in their local environment, to find common points of interest, and to recognize the potency of using visual images to stimulate reflection and discussion.

In the first research workshop, we asked participants to say what they thought our project was about, and they were animated in their responses. In Ranfield, participants suggested eagerly: Make own research 2; Communication; Research using new technology; Making videos/ apps/ drawings/ blogs/ animation; Interviews; Questions, how we would be in certain situations; Team work; People's lives, disability, disadvantage, bullying, young carers, speaking new languages. We reminded participants of the associations they had made during the taster sessions with the term 'disadvantage' and invited them to write down themes they might investigate, and to consider if they wanted to work on their own or in groups.

In Broadham, we worked with four children who had previously attended sessions with a family therapy organization. 7-year-old Freddie preferred to work on his own, while 8-year-old Karim (m), 10-year-old David (m), and 9-year-old Rafiqa (f) chose to work together, enthusiastically and repeatedly (but unsuccessfully) inviting Freddie to join them. Although these children attended the same primary school, they were not in the same friendship groups or classes, and whilst they each spoke privately about their own disadvantage with a research mentor, they were uncomfortable expressing sensitive topics in a group. One child preferred to write possible research themes rather than say them aloud, and others agreed. During the first few workshops, we therefore included an 'ideas Tombola' activity, where children wrote their research ideas on Post-its, folded them, placed them in a large top hat and later took turns to 'fish' an idea from the hat and talk about the idea as a group. Revisiting, adding to and discarding these themes each week became a favoured activity (as did wearing the hat), until Karim, David and Rafiqa settled on their shared love of food and interest in learning about their peers' food preferences and knowledge about healthy eating, while Freddie favoured working 1:1 with a mentor to make music and dance videos.

In Ranfield, the eight participants decided to work in two gendered groups of four. The girls noted a range of potential topics including: 'Pressure; Pressured smoking; Alcohol; Taking drugs; What do you think?; Aware of the effects?; Lung damage; Terrible side effects; Stupid; Awareness; Adverts; Old people bad role model for young people?; Wrong path; Young teens; Leading into gangs'. The boys noted: 'Unemployment; Unfair; Job center; Benefits; No money; What do you think?; Things you need; Not having things you need; Every get bullied; House/shame; Friends in house; Ever ashamed; Unemployed effect family life; Family Life; Affects on family life; Unhappy at home?; Parent; You wouldn't get enough food etc; Your parents will get stressed so you will feel a certain way as well; Console; Branded clothe'. We also discussed with them ideas about disadvantage suggested by YEP, including: 'Absent parents; Bad parenting; Barriers to help; Biases; Closed minded parents; Disability; Disadvantage is not always obvious; Dysfunctional family life; First language isn't English; Illness; Inequality; Invisible illness; Lack of education; Lack of education in parents; Lack of opportunities; Lack of privilege; Lack of quality schools in your area; Lack of services; Lack of support; Low socio-economic status; Mental illness; Not having something which others have; Poor/unsuitable housing; Postcode lottery; Poverty; Problems at home; Restricted access; Restricted freedom; Social exclusion; Unfairness; Vulnerable people; Young carers'. We reviewed what the young researchers understood the purpose of the workshops to be, so that we could be clear together, to help us plan what we were going to do next and sketch out possible research schedules.

*Snapshot 3: reporting back and dialogue on research actions*

During the workshops, we sought to create an ethos of dialogue, action and review, and to prioritize participants' views: all participant suggestions were discussed, made visible, acted on and revisited. Over time, this way of working gradually generated mutual trust, with agreed research actions arising either from dialogue during workshop activities or from a decision-making process where participants recognized



and called on the mentors' experience and knowledge of research. Throughout, the mentors endeavoured to enable the young researchers to make informed decisions about all aspects of the research process.

For example, in the first Ranfield research workshop, mentors reminded participants of the associations they had made during a taster session with the term 'disadvantage', and encouraged participants to practise creating research questions based on these. We then reviewed the different types of disadvantage suggested by YEP, and asked if any of the terms needed clarifying. Working in the participants' choice of two gendered groups, we asked each group to choose three themes of disadvantage. The boys' group asked the mentor to explain what was meant by 'socio-economic status', one group member asked 'does socio mean social?', and one asked whether this is to do with 'judgement'. This group made a shortlist of the topics 'Absent Parents', 'Low Socio-economic Status' and 'Problems at Home', began to develop questions and ultimately decided on the topic 'What's it like to have low socio-economic status?'

The girls' group shortlisted 'Absent parents', 'Young carers' and 'First language not English'. They initially identified Mental Health as a research topic, and created the following questions: 'How long has this been happening for?'; 'What effects does it have (and could you be sure they were able to tell the truth?)'; 'Do you take any medicine and what happens?' However, during discussion one of the girls said she felt the issue was 'too personal' and, when asked about this, suggested it might be upsetting and why would you want to ask that kind of question? The group quickly agreed, and decided on an alternative: 'What's it like if your first language isn't English?'

Following these processes of activity, dialogue and review, each research project in this pilot study developed iteratively through the exchange of perspectives offered by different participants, enabled by mentors' careful listening, note-taking, prompting participants to make connections between their differing ideas and to reach agreement.

#### *Enabling young researchers to be involved as active and empowered agents in every stage of the process*

This second project principle included developing the young researchers' capacity to reflect critically on the training offered, to connect the training with areas of disadvantage they wanted to explore, and to explore and develop their plans for data collection.

#### *Snapshot 4 reflecting critically and connecting with participant research interests*

Picking up on the above example, and following YEP advice to make the workshops 'not too serious', the mentors working in Ranfield had two t-shirts made for Workshop 2, with each group's question printed on the front. The mentors wore the t-shirts to the next session, and asked the amused participants to write answers to each question on the back of the t-shirts, using felt-tip pens. We then reflected on the activity, writing down the group's evaluations as a way of facilitating answers, and we made it clear that when participants decided on the design of their research projects we would remind them of their thoughts and reflections.

The boys explained to the girls that 'low socio-economic status' meant that you were poor and the effects it had on you. Participants wrote the following comments on the t-shirts:

What's it like if English isn't your first language? 'It's alright; People might call you names; Hard to Learn; Difficult; Someone needs support; Isolated; People might swear at you using French; It can be frustrating; People might make fun of you; Difficult spellings'.

What's it like to have low socio-economic status? 'Stressful alone; Hard; People will ignore you; Sad and depressing; Embarrassed to show; You will never have friends; No respect; You might feel isolated; Emotional'.

The group reflected on the nature of this research activity, considering if they might like to use a similar approach, and we asked them what they thought was good ('Pro') and what might be tricky/bad ('Con'), with the following responses contributed keenly:

Pro: 'T-shirts; Helps people; It gets the words out of you; It's funny; In a big crowd you can read what other people have put so it offer support/ideas; Might give more confidence to try it; Let's people think; If someone puts that it's difficult you feel someone understands; You could get teachers to do it'.

Con: 'If you can't spell it might be embarrassing; You might think it's stupid; People might be confused because it's unusual; You might use pens rather than felt tips as I don't like the sound felt tips make'.

This was one of many ways of acknowledging participants' choices, affirming their decisions, showing that the mentors had acted on each group's decisions, prompting critical reflection and then using this as a springboard for exploring and evaluating issues and data collection methods. It was also fun.

### *Snapshot 5 exploring data collection methods*

In Broadham, three participants were asked to think about questions they might ask as part of their chosen research topic of food preferences and eating habits. These included:

What kind of food do you like?; What kind of food do you hate?; Do you know what it is made of?; Do you like ever food?; Do you Love food?; What tipe of food that like?; What kind of food do you eat at home?; What kind of do you eat bad home?.

Revisiting an activity from the taster sessions, the children chose to use digital recorders to interview each other using these questions. They then listened to the recordings and reflected on how they felt about being an interviewer and being interviewed:

Rafiq: um uncomfortable sometimes like just wondering what you were going to say and like you would erm struggle with that sometimes like for me you would struggle to (.)

Mentor: to find the right words?

Rafiq: yeah sort of

Mentor (to David): how about you?

David: it was a bit awkward

Mentor: I remember one of you said you felt like you were wasting people's time

Rafiq: that was me yeah

After trialling different methods, including drawing and using the iPad App 'Garage Band' to compose music as a form of self-expression, the group decided to conduct a questionnaire for their classmates to fill in. However, they were clear that it should not be 'too serious', and that it must 'look good'. We moved temporarily to the school computer suite so they could research online images to illustrate their questionnaires and make them look, in their words, 'professional'. At the same time, Freddie began to search for video clips of his favourite performing artists, and to study and imitate their dance 'moves'. Undecided as to his final research topic, he also searched online for information about his favourite football star.

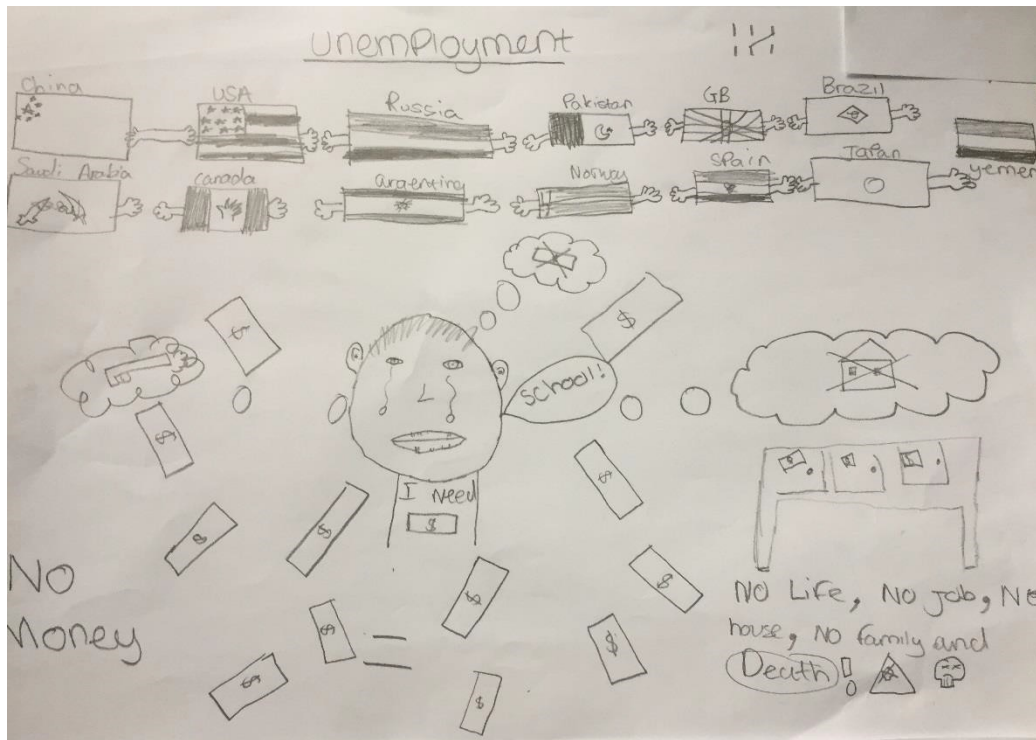
The following week, the mentors brought some sample questionnaire formats and layouts. Students working on the 'food' project discussed which formats their peers might understand and enjoy, and worked collaboratively to design their questionnaire. It became clear that this project was as much about getting to know their classmates' ways of life and ethnicity as about food, with questions including who they live and eat with, where they eat, if they eat out, how many languages are spoken at home, and what they considered to be 'healthy eating'. Working in an adjoining room, and 1:1 with a mentor who he asked to film his dancing, 7 year-old Freddie began to make break dance videos. Ultimately, he chose not to pursue dance as a topic, and instead, created a PowerPoint quiz about football to share with his classmates. Freddie had developed extremely good technology skills at school, and took great pride in helping others, including older peers, with technical difficulties – the highly visual quiz he created bore testament to this talent. The children's classmates responded positively to the quiz and questionnaires, and the food questionnaire was completed by one Year 5 and two Year 6 classes, at the request of students across the year group (64 total responses).

In Ranfield, participants decided to ask their peers to draw images of the chosen research topics during timetabled art classes (see example in [Figure 2](#)), and used these during focus groups with their peers; to prompt discussion, the child researchers asked each young focus group participant to choose an anonymised drawing, and to say why they had chosen the image. Ideas from the focus groups were then developed into questionnaires, which were distributed across the school, with 94 responses.

### *Working with the young researchers to develop impact and outreach work*

This principle was reflected in the decision-making processes that enabled the young researchers to make informed choices about impact and outreach. Early on in the workshops, mentors introduced the idea that the projects could be shared, and impact plans were revisited regularly. Spaces for impact suggested by participants included with peers and teachers in school, friends and family, the wider community, local city or region, and national and international forums, with suggested formats ranging from local showcase presentations, school newsletters and assemblies, presentations to local councils, MPs and national charities and worldwide dissemination via the internet. We reviewed examples of other young researchers' work available online<sup>3</sup>, some participants found the online videos 'too wordy' or 'confusing', preferring short, edited versions. Participants who had worked on sensitive issues in their own lives opted not to share their research beyond our workshops.

Figure 2. Young participant's drawing of 'unemployment'



#### Snapshot 6 developing dissemination plans

In Broadham, participants decided to share their research findings using Powerpoint presentations in their respective classes, and with teachers, friends and family (parents, siblings and cousins) at a celebratory dissemination event held after school, where a range of their creative and expressive work was exhibited, including drawings, music compositions, and short videos they had made. The participants greatly enjoyed these events, and attendees commented on how the children radiated confidence in their presentations. Teachers expressed an interest in adopting our research approach for end-of-term, student-led projects.

In Ranfield, participants first discussed what they would like to share, and reached a consensus on sharing anonymised data from their studies, including their peers' drawings of disadvantage, along with videos, photos and transcripts of the focus group activities they had led with peers, and the results of their questionnaires. Mentors suggested using Post-Its to express their first, second and third preference choice of different media types they might use to present their research, and a consensus was reached on: school assembly, leaflet, regional seminar with the partner organization, and sharing on a national charity website. Following mentor guidance, participants video-recorded questions to find out how different charities might feature their research findings, and sent these to Children England, Four in Ten and Save the Children. There was also lively debate about sharing material on the school website, with some vocal in their opposition, suggesting that the school claimed credit for things it did not undertake. In the end, a vote was taken, with 2 against and 6 for.

#### DISCUSSION

Our work on this pilot project explored participatory research approaches that provide young people with opportunities to build the knowledge and confidence needed to research issues that are important, meaningful and relevant to them, and to lead in decision-making through all stages of the research process. Part of this involved enabling the young people to feel confident in expressing their views, to develop knowledge about established research methods and tools, to reflect critically on research principles and procedures and to explore and interpret these in the contexts of their own lives. The resultant projects, not all of which can be shared due to participants' choices, led to powerful visualizations of the diversity of issues that characterize their lives and were relevant to them. The multiple projects undertaken by our young participants reflect the diversity, fluidity and instability of the communities in which they live, the often unsettled nature of their home lives, their feelings about being 'poor', their confusion over aspects of day-to-day life that more privileged individuals may take for granted, the often concealed

forms of disadvantage that define how they live, and their hopeful, eager search for a sense of respect, community and belonging.

In this pilot project, the young participants' research was enabled through the three core principles that lay at the heart of our work: (1) to develop and sustain relationships with young, hard-to-reach individuals; (2) to enable participants to be involved as active and empowered agents; and (3) to offer training and mentoring in skills and practices related to all stages of the research process. We tentatively suggest that these principles may offer a framework for new ways of thinking about 'third spaces' (Gutiérrez 2008) as sites for the development of participatory pedagogies that explore the 'complex embeddings and mediation of teaching and learning within cultures and discourses, systems and everyday practice' (Luke 2006, 3). The concept of third space suggests a contested area where students' 'voices' can be heard, where meanings are negotiated, and where knowledge, skills and dispositions are co-constructed. The third space may be literal, such as an after-school or lunchtime club, or it may refer to metaphorical spaces where learning is negotiated through agentive activity by learners and teachers in formal school settings (Potter and McDougall 2017). This suggestion raises profound questions about how classroom-based pedagogy can embrace the principles of participatory research, particularly when the research design is deliberately adaptive, provisional and ambivalent. These characteristics are at odds with the current era of outcomes-driven performativity and the 'deficit portraits' often painted in political rhetoric which 'compel educators to "fix" communities and their members so that they match normative views and practices' (Gutiérrez 2008, 151), and so that their progress can be measured against internationally comparable standards, which bear little or no relevance to the lived realities, practices and knowledge of the children and young people who they purport to assess.

We suggest that the three principles of our participatory research design chime with definitions of pedagogy that position relationships and values at the centre of the intersecting dimensions of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment (Nind, Hall, and Curtin 2016). Placing relationships at the heart of learning, researchers can work alongside educators to create school cultures that foster belonging and genuinely support all students' expertise and ways of knowing by encouraging children and young people to share and reflect on issues of concern to them in their lives in the wider community, and in ways that are meaningful to them. As Bruner (1996, 63) asserts, 'A choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message'. For us as a research team, the many challenges of initiating and sustaining the pedagogical approach of this pilot project were far outweighed by the rewards of enabling young people to be involved equitably and respectfully as active and empowered agents in decision-making and action at every stage of their own research projects. For the partner organizations and participating schools, the research projects shed new light on the complexity of disadvantage, on the unsettling fluidity that characterized the children and young people's lives, and on the young participants' well-developed understanding of the possibilities and limitations offered to them.

Our longer-term goals are to continue to work with the participants to disseminate their work, and to develop a larger scale project. The latter will include out-of-school and in-school projects, where we will work with teachers to help them support student-led research projects that might draw a wider range of people and generations into the fields of investigation, including partnering educators with arts professionals to pool their expertise, and to plan and deliver creative pedagogic approaches (Peppler, Halverson, and Kafai 2016). This future research will aim to enable teachers to overcome barriers that may constrain students' engagement with learning, and renegotiate the sometimes conflictual relations between themselves and their students, and between their students and wider society.

## Notes

1. <http://lankellychase.org.uk/> Lankelly Chase is a charitable organization that seeks to identify underlying causes of social disadvantage and champion lasting solutions that support people to live rewarding lives.
2. All spellings faithfully present participants' spoken or written responses.
3. For example, see <https://photovoice.org/>; UNICEF and UNESCO video shorts, such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssZ5q2T8eF8>.

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