Participatory Research Approaches in Educational Psychology Training and Practice

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This article has two aims: to introduce participatory research approaches with children and young people, and to consider such approaches within educational psychology training, practice and research. A range of ways of conceptualising and approaching participatory research is explored. Models applied to researching with children and young people specifically are then explained. A critical analysis of participatory research methods is offered, outlining power-related criticisms, ethical considerations and practical issues.

The focus then turns to educational psychology, looking at applications of such approaches in researching with children and young people, the group that educational psychologists (EPs) work with predominantly. It is proposed that participatory research methods are highly relevant to the profession, both in the training of EPs and for practising psychologists. This is set in the context of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology at the University of East London. It is suggested that educational psychology research should take an increasingly participatory focus.

Keywords: participatory research, educational psychology, children as researchers, co-researchers, young researchers, participation

Understanding Participatory Research Approaches

Defining Participatory Research

What makes research "participatory" is not the design or methods used but the involvement of participants in the research process itself (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007). In participatory research, the extent to which participants are involved can look different, from the depth of participant involvement, to the stages at which they are involved or to the extent to which they are "co-researchers". Thus, participatory research has been defined as an "approach" to research (Schratz & Walker, 1995).

Taking a participatory research approach allows for consideration of the issues of power and control within research, especially between researchers and the researched (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). Wang, Li, Pang, Liang and Su (2016) describe researcher attitude in participatory approaches as an "orientation to inquiry" that aims to address power imbalances and places value on the contribution of and collaboration between all those involved. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) argue that participatory research approaches have grown in popularity alongside the post-positivist contexts of questioning and challenging the principles and practices of conventional research approaches. The shift towards recalibrating power imbalances and valuing all perspectives can also be seen to fit societal shifts in the West that include the platform that social media gives for people to share their views, as well as the rise of "user-led organisations", particularly in the National Health Service and social care (National Skills Academy for Social Care, 2011). Internationally, activists, development practitioners and others have called for public institutions and governments to increase public involvement in decision-making (Cornwall, 2008).

There is much terminology associated with participatory research approaches, not limited to but including "user involvement", "participatory approaches", "community consultation" and "inclusive research" (Salway, Harriss & Chowbey, 2011). In the United States of America, for example, a common approach in social research is termed "community-based participatory research": a partnership approach emphasising empowerment, shared decision-making, social transformation and shifts in power at all levels (Becker, Reiser, Lambert & Covello, 2014). It could be argued that today's participatory research approaches grew from the foundations of Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR was developed in social psychology in the 1940s and focused on the continual interplay between research and intervention (Potvin, Bisset & Walz, 2010). However, the notion of discovering knowledge in a collaborative, co-operative manner amongst people from a range of different experiences in participatory research approaches is likely to have stemmed from a wider amalgamation of socio-political and contextual changes. Arguably, these shifts can be traced back to the philosophy of Paulo Freire's seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2006). This text argued for a pedagogy which treated the learner as a co-creator of know-

ledge.

Participatory research also developed within the context of humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology developed in the 1950s and '60s, with Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow as two of its key figures (Jarvis, 2000). The humanistic approach is person-centred, taking a holistic view when trying to understand people, and Rogers believed that all humans are motivated to fulfil their potential and "actualise" (Jarvis, 2000). In line with humanistic psychology, participatory approaches to research consider the "participants" not as simply subjects to be inspected under a microscope by researchers but as individuals with agency and value, with hopes to empower those individuals as part of the research process.

M. Fox, Martin and Green (2007) describe "participatory research" as a term that is synonymous with "emancipatory research" and "advocacy research" as each share common fundamental elements of working with marginalised groups with a view to emancipation and empowerment. PAR, for example, actively involves participants in the research process, using a flexible design that can fit the needs and nature of the research as it progresses over time (Robson, 2011). Similarly, without specifically using action research cycles, participatory approaches aim for "knowledge for action" within the context of social change (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2011).

As there is currently a lack of consensus in defining participatory research as a term, this article understands it as an approach to research. An approach that values the involvement of participants, is concerned with addressing the power dynamics of research and uses methodology flexibly to best suit the research needs.

Models of Participatory Research

Since participatory research began, there have been many attempts to conceptualise, understand and provide a framework or structure for the processes involved. In 2011, for example, Creative Commons published an overview of participation models which documented thirty different models from the year 1969 up until 2010 (Creative Commons, 2011). While the participants in a participatory research design can be individuals of any age, this article takes a particular focus on research with children and young people. Therefore, the models explored here are those developed specifically in relation to researching with children and young people.

Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992), adapted from Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen's Participation (Arnstein, 1969), was the first conceptualisation of children's involvement in research and is arguably still the most widely referenced (Moules & O'Brien, 2012). Hart's ladder is shown in Figure 1 and was developed as part of a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) publication following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

The ladder consists of eight different "levels" at which children can be seen to participate. The ladder is a simplistic representation of participation and has been criticised for its hierarchical nature, the implication that levels of participation happen in sequence and that it does not necessarily account for contextual or cultural factors (Kellett, 2009a).
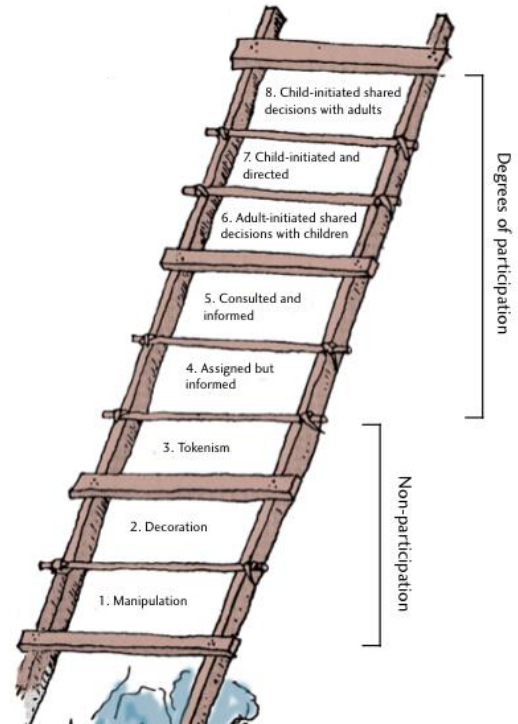

Figure 1. The Ladder of Participation. Reprinted from "Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship" by R. A. Hart, 1992, Florence: UNICEF, page 8.

Various other models were developed that shared this linear interpretation of different stages or levels of participation. However, these have faced criticism for not representing the complexities of real-life situations, being hierarchical and ignoring the potential that can exist between levels (Kanji & Greenwood, 2001; Kindon et al., 2007; Pretty, 1995; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997). Alternatively, multidimensional models of participation have been developed (Badham & Davies, 2007; Mallan, Singh & Giardina, 2010; Moules & O'Brien, 2012). These models allow for participation to be seen as a more complex and dynamic process.

Recognising the complexities and nuances of participatory research and with an increase in impetus to embed participation within organisations, some models of participation began to incorporate the importance of fostering a participatory culture (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2007; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin & Sinclair, 2003; Participation Works, 2007). Over time, models of participation ap-

pear to have shifted from a classificatory nature to an explanatory nature and, most recently, to using a more systemic framework (Gal, 2017; Thomas, 2012). Gal's model of participation, for example, uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to offer a multi-layered approach to consider many dimensions of participation, although additional guidance for how the model can be used to either promote or enable meaningful participatory research would be helpful (Figure 2).

Having introduced the concept of participatory research, its background development and some of the models associated with it, this article will now discuss literature that has critiqued participatory research.

Applications of Participatory Research Approaches

Participatory research is widely carried out with children and young people across different fields, including international development, learning disabilities and health. This section of the article explores examples of recent participatory research projects in these fields.

Policy initiatives in the National Health Service include an emphasis on the participation of individuals and communities in healthcare; there has been a rise in user involvement in the evaluation of health care services (Truman & Raine, 2001). An example of a practical application of participatory research in this field is research from Ireland that included 394 young people in developing the sexual health curriculum (O'Higgins & Gabhainn, 2010). Young people took part in workshops where their views were elicited and then presented in "webs" of ideas which provided clear guidelines and recommendations for the development of sex education (O'Higgins & Gabhainn, 2010).

Autistic activism is promoting the use of campaigns and research that involve autism communities, rather than solely neurotypicals (www.network.autism.org.uk). Historically, research priorities in autism were set by funders and academics, but, more recently, researchers have been working in partnership with autistic people using participatory methods to promote research that meets the needs and priorities of autistic people (Pellicano, 2018). For example, the "Know Your Normal" project used a community-based participatory research approach where young autistic adults and researchers worked in partnership to explore young autistic people's mental health and support available (Crane, Adams, Harper, Welch & Pellicano, 2019).

In education, the rise of interest in participatory research has also led to practical applications. A number of organisations in the UK promote children's participation. INVOLVE is one such organisation that, in collaboration with children and young adults, has created a guide to actively involving young people in research (Kirby, 2004). The Open University's Children's Research Centre works with children and young people to support their engagement in research. Over 150 children and young people have carried out their own research projects and the centre's work is guided by a children and young people's research council. The centre has developed a number of resources, including a research skills training programme for children, designed to be implemented or adapted by others so that children can become "active researchers in their own right" (Kellett, 2009b, p. 399).

A Critical Analysis of Participatory Research with Children and Young People

Although the advantages of engaging children and young people in research and involving them as co-researchers may seem obvious, current thinking warns against making blanket assumptions that participatory research with children and young people is a good thing; the participatory "approach has more recently been problematised" (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; R. Fox, 2013; Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010; Horgan, 2017, p. 245; Smith, Monaghan, & Broad, 2002). Critiques of participatory research approaches fall into three broad categories: power-related criticisms, ethical considerations and practical issues.

Power relationships are a key issue for participatory research with children and young people, in relation to the people involved, the context of the research and the research process itself (Horgan, 2017). Power dynamics exist in any research, but in participatory research it is the adults who hold gatekeeping positions across both knowledge and access (in terms of training and knowledge of research processes and protocols, as well as access to resources and the academic research world). This can be difficult to reconcile with the notions of collaboration and co-researching which participatory research with children and young people aim to promote. There are also power dynamics at play within groups of children and young people, within the institutions in which they belong or where the research takes place, as well as within research processes, which can facilitate certain voices to be heard over others — these can result in some children and young people being disempowered by a participatory research experience or being excluded from the research in the first place (Horgan, 2017). Spyrou (2011, p. 152) wrote a critical analysis of published works on children's participation and made the case for a "critical, reflexive approach" that considers the research contexts and power imbalances within them. While this may be lengthy and messy, as it would involve critique and analysis or every possible facet at every possible level of the research process, Spyrou (2011) argues that it is the most ethical approach.

There are a number of ethical issues within participatory research. Ethical considerations that would be standard protocol for most research become more problematic in participatory research with children and young people. There can be tensions between following ethical procedures and the ethics of meaningfully involving children and young people — if ethical approval must be applied for before children and
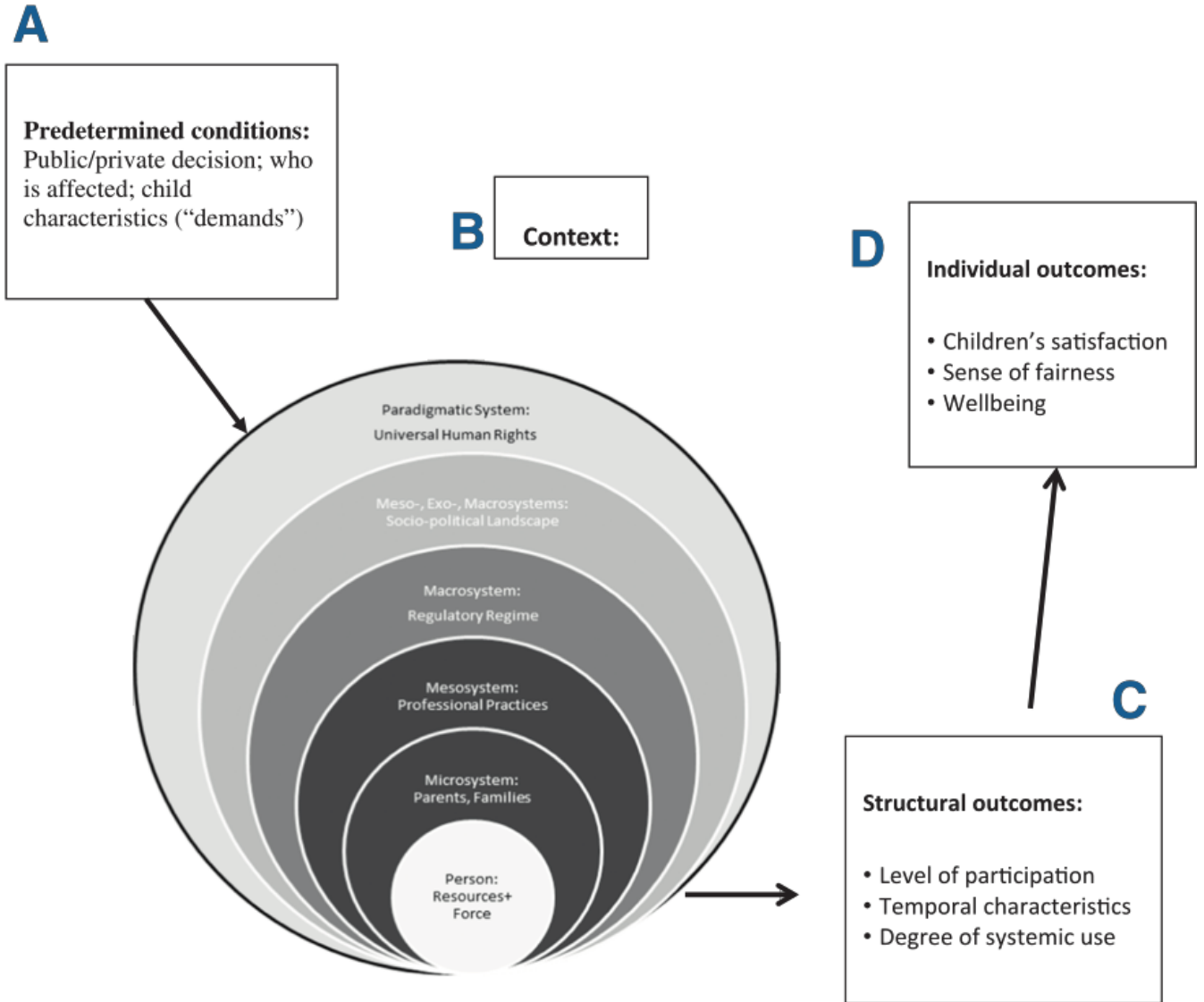
A

Predetermined conditions:
Public/private decision; who
is affected; child
characteristics ("demands")

B Context:

D

Individual outcomes:

- Children's satisfaction
- Sense of fairness
- Wellbeing

Paradigmatic System:
Universal Human Rights

Meso-, Exo-, Macrosystems:
Socio-political Landscape

Macrosystem:
Regulatory Regime

Mesosystem:
Professional Practices

Microsystem:
Parents, Families

Person:
Resources+
Force

C

Structural outcomes:

- Level of participation
- Temporal characteristics
- Degree of systemic use

Figure 2. Understanding children's ability to participate: An ecological model. Reprinted from "An ecological model of child and youth participation" by T. Gal, 2017, Children and Youth Services Review, 79, page 58.

young people have even been consulted, how participatory can the research be? Ethical concerns continue once participatory research has begun. Smith, Monaghan and Broad (2002, p. 200) list several ethical concerns, including risk of exploitation for a vulnerable group, use and value of the research, child protection, confidentiality and unanticipated risks. A further ethical concern raised is about how far participation is desired by children and young people, or how far it is imposed on children and young people by those seeking data (Birch & Miller, 2002). Despite its unique needs, there is no universally recognised ethical guideline or framework for participatory research with children and young people published by the British Psychological Society (BPS) or any other similar body.

Lastly, participatory research has also faced criticism related to the practicalities of the approach. Kellett's discussion (Kellett, 2005) of the methodological issues surrounding participatory research with children and young people included the level of scrutiny that should be applied to the research of children and young people and how it should be done; how autonomous children and young people can be in their own research; how children and young people's research data should be analysed; and how findings should be disseminated. There are also issues about the extent to which children and young people can or should engage in analysis and how well a relatively short training course can equip children and young people with the necessary research skills. None of these questions could be disentangled from

the current context of the research world, and, therefore, Kellett (2005) posited the question of whether an entirely new research paradigm is needed for the 21st century.

Participatory Research Approaches in Educational Psychology

The Relevance to Educational Psychology

This article has discussed the principles of participatory research, describing it as an orientation to enquiry which is fitting with the drive to increase participation across education, aiming to address power imbalances as well as empower and emancipate individuals (Kellett, 2009b; Wang et al., 2016). Such principles are likely to sound familiar to EPs and others working in education. It is now proposed that educational psychology practice has much in common with participatory research approaches.

It has been argued that all work undertaken by EPs is "research" in the broadest terms, investigation and data collection to reach new conclusions, albeit often improvised and conducted in a natural environment (Gersch, Lipscomb & Potton, 2017). The role of the EP is commonly described as a researcher–practitioner. If EP practice is to be likened to research in this way then it is also worth noting that the key principles of participatory research are also closely linked to EP practice. Consultation and assessment involve working collaboratively with others, involving service users in the problem-solving process and having an awareness of and/or addressing power imbalances within situations and systems. This illustrates the profession's drive to increase participation of all service users.

International agreement on the importance of children's right to be heard and participate was reinforced through Article 12 of the 1989 UNCRC, which then led to "a plethora of initiatives to hear children's views on matters concerning them" (Nind, Boorman & Clarke, 2012, p. 643). The publication of the Children and Families Act (2014) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE], Department of Health [DH], 2014) focused policy and practice on person-centred approaches. Integral to the Code of Practice is promoting the participation of children, young people and families. Listening to and involving service users was not a new concept for EPs with the introduction of this legislation; seeking the voice of the child has long been an aim of educational psychology practice (Burden, 1996; Gersch, 1987). The challenges and limitations of participation by young people are also noted in the literature (Hartas, 2011; Ingram, 2013).

It seems uncontroversial to state that increasing participation is a key focus of educational psychology practice; what about the role of participation in educational psychology research?

Educational Psychology Participatory Research with Children and Young People

As listening to and valuing the opinions of children and young people is a key function of the work of EPs, the profession has become a significant advocate for children working alongside researchers as co-researchers (Gersch et al., 2017). However, while participatory approaches are common in social research (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015), such methodologies do not yet seem widespread in research carried out by EPs. Examples of participatory research with children and young people that has been carried out by EPs are now considered. It should be noted that EPs have carried out research with adults as the participants in the design, but such examples are not included here as they go beyond the focus of this article.

Participatory approaches with children and young people offer a range of creative methods by which to understand and embrace the competencies and knowledge of children and young people, utilising art, photography, video and music (Gillies & Robinson, 2012). One such creative method is Forum Theatre, a process whereby participants work together alongside a facilitator to develop a performance about their shared experience (Boal, 2002). EP Nick Hammond (2013) presents his own piece of research using Forum Theatre as a case study for eliciting and advocating for the views of a year group within a small, rural primary school. Hammond offers this case study as a creative method by which EPs can find children's views in a collaborative and participant-focused manner, involving underlying emancipatory processes.

Pearson and Howe (2017) developed a research team of children who investigated how to change behaviour in the playground. This resulted in the senior leadership of the school making significant changes to the playground. The authors conclude that the children raised issues that had not been considered by adults (Pearson & Howe, 2017). Helpfully, the research included an assessment of the level of participation that children felt they had in the project, and this served to illustrate some of the challenges involved in working with children as co-researchers.

Further research has shown that participatory research approaches can be accessed by the children and young people that EPs work with across a wide range of Special Educational Needs (SEN). To explore the experiences and preferences of pre-verbal children and young people with complex needs in residential special schools, ethnographic techniques and structured observation took place with ten young people aged between eight and sixteen years (Hill et al., 2017). A Young Researchers' group was developed to "advise, support, steer and report on the study", including young people with many different SEN (Hill et al., 2017, p. 57). The researchers concluded that using participatory research with a vulnerable population encouraged them to be flexible and reflective, attend to power imbalances and ensure that parti-

cipants' rights and needs were met consistently (Hill et al., 2017).

A common method used in research by EPs is the mosaic approach, most often used in early years settings, which enables children to design and carry out their own research (Clark & Moss, 2005). In 2010, EP Sara Day published research about how an array — or mosaic — of different data-collection methods were developed with children aged between twenty months and four years old to explore their views on the Children's Centres they attended. This research found that using a rich collection of data, generated inductively and individualised for each child, allowed for the research questions to be answered "in a robust and rigorous way with young child participants that were potentially silent and difficult to access" (Day, 2010, p. 54).

The Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of East London

Both authors are connected to the Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of East London (UEL). The first author is in her third year of training, and the second author is an Academic and Professional Tutor on the programme. The doctoral programme at UEL is grounded in the values of social justice, beneficence and autonomy. Therefore, teaching and learning is underpinned by a philosophy that is in line with participatory research approaches — making a difference, listening to service users, empowering individuals and communities. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards require the programme to involve service users.

Increasingly the curriculum takes a participatory focus, reflecting national changes such as the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, DH, 2014) in addition to the programme's ethos. For example, in their first year, trainees develop skills in multimedia advocacy through the university's Rix Wiki. Service users are involved in programme governance and teaching sessions. This periodical, Educational Psychology Research and Practice (EPRaP), which was created by the programme, aims to have a broad reach and range of contributors; a previous issue included an audio book review by a woman with autism, for example.

As on all educational psychology professional training doctorates, at UEL each trainee carries out a research project that makes a distinctive contribution to the subject area and produces a thesis that is examined at *viva voce* examination. Trainees take the lead on determining the focus of their research, in collaboration with their local authority placement and in line with programme requirements. Trainees take part in teaching sessions on a range of approaches to research, and the curriculum has recently been adapted to include an explicit focus on participatory research approaches. Current research projects illustrate an increasing interest in participatory approaches. The focus of the first author's doctoral

research is on young people's experiences of a participant-led theatre project for care leavers called the Verbatim Formula. Another trainee is working with 19- to 25-year-old returners to education, using participatory and visual methods to listen to their narratives of resilience contributing to a successful return to education. The increasing focus on participatory research approaches is also reflected in the research of the tutor team. The second author is working with a colleague on a participant-led research project with young people from a nearby youth forum. The young people, acting as co-researchers, are using film to communicate their experiences of working with EPs and are finding out EP perspectives on this.

Considerations for Educational Psychologists

In addition to the critiques that have been made about participatory research generally, there are a number of considerations that need to be taken into account by EPs when planning participatory research projects, some that are particularly pertinent to doctoral research. When contracting research, EPs may need to use negotiation skills to meet the needs of relevant partners — if the focus of the research is determined by child and young people co-researchers, is it in line with local authority, university and/or commissioners' priorities?

Ensuring that children and young people give informed consent to work with EPs is a priority within the profession and a standard required by the HCPC (HCPC, 2015). Taking part in a participatory research project can mean consenting to a range of activities, from developing skills to planning, carrying out the research and dissemination of findings. EPs need to ensure that children and young people are fully informed regarding what taking part in such projects involves and flexibility is needed; they do not always want to be involved in every stage of the research (Kirby, 1999). The educative element of participatory approaches is time consuming; it is not uncommon for a researcher to work with a group of participants over a number of sessions to share information about how to plan and carry out a research project before the research is designed and then carried out. This poses an obvious challenge for time-limited doctoral research.

The openness of participatory research design could pose a potential barrier; it relies on university and, where relevant, local authority ethics panels to allow for a high level of flexibility at the point of ethics approval. It could be argued that the flexibility needed in participatory research could be anxiety provoking for some trainees, who may seek reassurance in being able to carefully plan each stage of their research; the messiness of participatory projects could be unsettling.

Approaches to analysis in participatory research can be perceived to be less rigorous than more traditional methodologies; more accessible approaches are often of necessity if participants are to authentically take part in analyzing data.

Indeed, a criticism of participatory research is that it can lack credibility in terms of trustworthiness and rigour (Lennie, 2006). Ensuring research is at "doctoral level" could be a concern. Finally, although it is possible for participatory research to build on an existing evidence base while focusing on topics of value to individuals and communities, this is not an explicit aim of such approaches. This raises the important question of the wider purpose of educational psychology research — who is it for?

Conclusion

Participatory research can be best understood as a way of approaching research, one that aims to redress power imbalances and empower individuals. It is widely used with children and young people in social research. This article has proposed that participatory research approaches are a good fit with educational psychology practice and has explored some examples of published research employing such methodologies. On the Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology at UEL, participatory approaches are an increasing focus of both the curriculum and research projects. Going forwards, it is hoped that EPs will increasingly engage in participatory research, developing a body of research that holds real meaning and value for service users.

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