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Participatory research with young people: Benefits, limitations, and methodological considerations

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Abstract

Participatory research with young people centres their knowledge and experiences to generate research outcomes which are meaningful to them. In recent years, there has been an increase in participatory research within education, yet there is still little methodological insight into this approach. In this project, which explored adolescents' reading motivation and engagement, a young people's advisory panel was convened to ensure the perspectives and experiences of young people were central to the research. The panel consisted of 6 young people (13 – 15-years-old) from 3 schools in Scotland. The panel worked with researchers at the Universities of XX and XX and a national literacy organisation across one academic year to plan and design the project, carry out data collection and interpret the findings. To achieve this, online group meetings, an online interview training workshop, online 1-1 interviews with the first author and in person peer-interviews were conducted. In this article, the methodological practice of working with a young people's advisory panel to carry out a research project is evaluated using thematic analysis of panel members' reflections and meeting content. A discussion of the benefits, limitations, and practicalities are provided for researchers interested in working closely and collaboratively with young people to conduct educational research.

Keywords: Participatory, collaborative, advisory panel, young people, literacy

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1. Main text introduction

Participatory research has a long tradition within the fields of Health and Social Care (e.g., Farr et al. 2021) and Childhood and Youth Studies (e.g., Tisdall & Davis, 2006). More recently however, there has also been a growing focus within educational and psychological research that the intended users/beneficiaries of research should be actively included in the research process (e.g., Authors, 2021; Calderón López & Theriault, 2017; Levy & Thompson, 2015). This is particularly pertinent for adolescents (hereafter referred to as young people), as academic literature often focuses on the issues affecting them but rarely includes them as collaborators in the very research processes which seek to understand, define, and change their behaviour (Jacquez et al. 2013). Instead, young people are usually included only as participants (Moreno et al. 2021).

Participatory approaches to research aim to break away from traditional research conventions which only involve stakeholders as participants and collaborate with them throughout the research process (Torre and Fine, 2006a). This approach democratises research (Blumenthal, 2011; Hodge & Jones, 2000) and works towards addressing the power imbalance between 'the researcher and the researched' (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008, 121) that is intrinsic in traditional research (Bennett & Brunner, 2022). For research with young people in particular, the power imbalance between researcher and participant is amplified by social and cultural structures which position adults as holding more power than young people (Heath et al. 2009). Participatory approaches work to hand power back to young people as much as possible, so that they can shape research which is meaningful to their lives (Cahill, 2013).

Participatory approaches therefore require a 'de-privileging of "researcher only" expertise' (Byrne et al. 2009, p. 68), an acknowledgement that stakeholders (i.e., children, young people, parents, teachers) hold more knowledge about their own lives than external researchers do, and that this knowledge should be privileged within the research process (Cahill,

2013; Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008). Flinders et al. (2016) argue that the co-production of research between researchers and stakeholders is connected to an intellectual shift away from 'an "ivory tower" approach to scholarship' (265) in which the generation of knowledge is reserved for academics. Skipper and Pepler (2021) frame this as a need for researchers to move away from an independent self (i.e., self-governing, separate from the social context) towards an interdependent self (i.e., reliant on others and deeply connected with the social context), prioritising different ways of working which allow the generation of knowledge to be shared equally.

There are numerous ways in which researchers have collaborated with children and young people to conduct research in other fields. For example, carrying out adult-designed interviews (Baker et al. 1996), developing research questions and interview schedules (Kellett et al. 2004) and conducting peer interviews (Authors, 2020). However, there have been, to our knowledge, no literacy research projects which have collaborated with young people throughout the whole research process: from study design, through to data collection and analysis. However, failing to involve young people in the educational issues which are relevant to them risks reinforcing adult interpretations of their lives (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008) and misses 'the contextual input necessary to represent the unique youth experience' (Jaquez et al. 2012; 177). As knowledge which is generated through education research is often used to effect change in policy and practice, it is vital that young people's voices be at the heart of this work so that real-world outcomes accurately reflect their needs and experiences. This approach is reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12 (UN General Assembly, 1989), which supports children and young people's expression of their own views and encourages their contribution towards decisions in matters that concern them.

The context for this article is a project which seeks to understand young people's reading experiences and explore the widely recognised decline in motivation to read during

adolescence (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2020). Conducting a project about young people's lives without inviting young people themselves to shape the research process would risk producing outcomes which reinforce adult perceptions of their experiences and needs (Authors 2021). This is especially pertinent in reading motivation research, as much adult-led research in this area does not appear to have had substantial, sustainable impact on the issue. Working collaboratively with young people can provide new insights which could lead to more effective interventions than those based on adult-led research. Therefore, a panel of young people (13–15-years-old) was convened at the early stages of the project and collaborated with adult researchers throughout to ensure the research and its outcomes reflected their experiences and those of others their age.

Within participatory research, an advisory panel usually consists of a group of individuals who represent the 'target' or stakeholder group for a project or intervention. The group is brought together to discuss a specific research issue, to enhance understanding and to provide strategic advice (Farr et al., 2020), meeting at multiple stages of a project. Advisory panels work to guide the research process through an ongoing relationship with researchers whereby decisions are made together. Members of advisory panels can be professionals, individuals with lived experience and/or individuals who belong to a particular identity group. Advisory panels with youth members have been used in research projects in other fields (see Moreno et al. 2021); however, this approach is still relatively novel, especially within education research.

It is intended that this article will add to the collective knowledge on participatory approaches within educational research, and literacy research more specifically. We hope this approach will not only demonstrate the value in conducting participatory research with young people, but also highlight some of the methodological and ethical considerations that should be held in mind when adopting this approach.

1.2. Research context

The methodology reported here took place within the context of a research project exploring young people's reading motivation and engagement, XX. The findings from the project will be made available elsewhere; the current article focusses specifically on the methodological approach of using participatory methods to work with a young people's advisory panel to design and conduct research.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Young people's advisory panel members

The young people's advisory panel consisted of 6 young people (5 female) aged 13–15-years-old, from 3 high schools in Scotland. The schools were varied in terms of geographic location, number of enrolled students and SIMD composition (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2020). Each school was asked to select 2–3 pupils to be invited to join the panel. Three schools selected 2 pupils and 1 school selected 3 pupils; of these, 6 pupils from 3 schools decided to join the project.

Due to the nature of recruitment via schools, it wasn't possible for researchers to determine panel composition. However, it was emphasised to teachers that the panel should be made up of young people from diverse demographic backgrounds, with a broad range of reading attitudes and skills. Four members of the panel described themselves as 'readers', while 2 identified as 'non-readers'; 2 panel members indicated that they read for pleasure 'all the time', 3 read for pleasure 'sometimes' and 1 reported that they 'never' read for pleasure. All members of the panel had English as their first language. 4 panel members identified as White Scottish, 2 as White British.

All panel members and their parents provided written consent to their participation, both at the outset and where there were significant developments in the project methodology based on group discussions.

2.2 Procedure

Due to the participatory nature of the project, a rigid plan for the panel was not determined at the outset, although the research team did submit a pre-registration detailing the proposed structure for the initial interaction with the panel (XX). This structure was approved by the University of XX Ethics committee. The open-ended structure was to allow the research team to work flexibly, being responsive to ideas and suggestions from the panel.

Three 1-hour-long meetings in October/November 2021 were initially proposed, with panel members being made aware that there was the possibility of engaging in additional activities throughout the year if they would like. All panel members chose to remain involved for the entire academic year 2021/2022 and by the end of the project, all had had the opportunity to attend up to five online meetings, an online interview training workshop, a one-on-one online interview with the first author and the opportunity to conduct in person peer-interviews. It was emphasised that all activities were optional and that panel members could choose which activities to participate in. They were made aware that the total time they would be asked to commit to the project would be no more than 20 hours over 18 months, and that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

[FIGURE 1]

Figure 1. Overview of young people's advisory panel activities over the course of the project

Panel members were asked how they would like to be reimbursed for their contribution to the project and recognition for their involvement was designed accordingly. All panel members received a £25 book or high-street voucher (depending on their preference), a certificate of participation from the University of XX, a template for how to write about the project on their CV and will be acknowledged on all publications related to the project.

2.2.1 Meetings 1 – 3

Five meetings took place online between November 2021 and July 2022. Meetings were organised using an online scheduling tool and all meetings took place on weekday evenings during term time, lasting approximately one hour. Meetings were attended by the first and third authors and up to six panel members. All meetings were designed to be interactive, with opportunities for discussion, collaboration, and shared generation of knowledge. Panel members were welcomed to contribute verbally, through the meeting chat function and via collaborative workspaces (Google Jamboard™). After each meeting, the first author sent all members a short email summary of the discussions and an overview of the next steps. Panel members were invited to contribute asynchronously via email between sessions and to complete anonymous feedback forms after meetings 3 and 5 to document their experiences at each stage.

Meeting 1: Introduction to the project. The first meeting was comprised of (1) a short overview of the current literature related to the project by the first author; (2) discussions about how panel members would like to be involved in the project; (3) discussions about the definitions of key terms (e.g., 'reading', 'books', 'motivation') and how these applied to the project research questions; (4) initial generation of ideas about the reasons for the decline in reading motivation during adolescence.

Meeting 2: Discussing methodologies. The second meeting involved (1) discussion about the different research methodologies which could be used for the project; (2) decision about which methods to use for the current investigation; (3) generating ideas for interview questions.

Meeting 3: Next steps. The third meeting involved (1) a reflection on the development of the project so far and how it had been shaped by the panel's decisions; (2) discussions about dissemination of the research findings once the project was complete; (3) discussions about how (and if) panel members would like to be involved in the next stages of the project.

2.2.2 Interview training workshop

Panel members proposed carrying out peer-interviews as part of the data collection (see *section 3* for more detail). Therefore, the first author facilitated an interview training workshop to which all panel members were invited and 3 attended. The 1-hour, interactive workshop provided (1) discussion of good interview practice, including ethical guidelines; (2) opportunities for panel members to contribute their perspectives on important interview skills and procedures; (3) discussion about the aims and purpose of the interviews within the current project; (4) review of the interview questions and opportunities to provide feedback. A written summary was produced for those who did not attend.

2.2.3 One-on-one interview with first author

All panel members participated in a one-on-one interview with the first author. The content of these interviews formed part of the data for the wider project, however the interview itself also served an important methodological purpose: being interviewed themselves gave the panel members who were preparing to conduct peer-interviews an insight into the experience from the perspective of an interviewee and an opportunity to ask for further training or support

before conducting the interviews (although no panel member requested further support). For panel members who were not conducting peer-interviews (n = 4), it served as an opportunity to give further feedback on the interview schedule and on the overall interview experience, supporting final modifications before data collection began.

2.2.4 Peer interviews

Two panel members carried out peer-interviews with 11 other pupils at their schools (1 conducted 5 interviews; 1 conducted 6 interviews). Panel members interviewed their peers in person at school, with the first author present via Microsoft Teams. Before each interview, panel members had the opportunity to ask questions and practise with the first author. After their interviews were completed, they reflected on the experience with the first author.

2.2.5 Meetings 4-5

Meeting 4: Reflecting on the findings. Prior to this meeting, the first author began the first stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and reviewed the interview transcripts to establish salient themes. These themes were presented at the meeting for panel members to discuss. The meeting involved (1) panel members' interpretations of the preliminary findings; (2) generation of ideas for how to use the findings; (3) discussions of how to disseminate the findings.

Meeting 5: Reflecting on the research process: The final meeting was comprised of (1) a short presentation by the first author to summarise the whole project and panel members' contributions; (2) panel members' reflections on their involvement in the project; (3) discussions about recognition of panel members' contributions to the project.

2.2.6. Young people's evaluation of the process

Panel members completed an anonymous feedback form after meetings 3 and 5. The responses provided insights into panel members' experiences at each stage of the project and highlighted any adjustments that needed to be made. Responses also served as data for analysis of the method. Items related to their perceptions of the research process, the perceived benefits and limitations, and their hopes for the future of the research. All questions were optional.

2.3 Analysis

With the consent of panel members, video and audio recordings were made during each meeting. A five-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was carried out using the transcriptions from these meetings. Stages 1 and 2 involved the first author transcribing the panel meetings and workshop and becoming familiar with the data. At stage 3, the first author began coding the data from all meetings; the final author independently coded the data from meeting 1 and codes were compared to build consensus (stage 4). At stage 5, codes were categorised into themes.

Data from each of the two feedback forms was extracted and included within the analysis.

The first author also kept a fieldwork/research journal throughout, documenting relevant observations and reflecting on the process.

3. Results and discussion

This section is split into two complementary parts: (1) young people's perspectives and experiences of the research process, based on their responses to the feedback forms; and (2) adult researchers' perspectives of the research, based on thematic analysis of the

meeting transcripts. Both data sources contribute towards our evolving understanding of the methodological considerations associated with convening a young people's advisory panel. In order to foreground panel members' perspectives and experiences, their reflections are reported first *(section 3.1)*, before discussion of the themes which emerged from analysis of the meeting transcripts (*section 3.2*).

3.1 Young people's perspectives and experiences: Feedback received

Thematic analysis of the feedback from young people led to the emergence of five themes: (1) Project expectations; (2) Areas of enjoyment; (3) Collaborative working practices; (4) Areas for improvement; and (5) Project outcomes.

3.1.1. Project expectations

In order to inform future participatory research which fulfils the needs of young people (Kellett et al. 2004), it is important to understand how young people's initial expectations of a project align with their actual experience. In this project, panel members indicated that their involvement had been more significant than expected. This appeared to be viewed positively:

> To be honest I expected to be just listening but I'm glad we were able to contribute. We were able to say what we thought and it was a real discussion.

> I think we've been more involved than I thought which has been nice.

Within this group of young people, the apparent mismatch between their expectations for involvement and their actual contribution could reflect that (a) it was not communicated

sufficiently that, or how, their knowledge and expertise would be central to the project; or (b) they held deep-rooted expectations about how much power and/or responsibility they would have, despite our efforts to address this from the outset.

In participatory research, it is essential that young people's roles are clearly communicated from the outset, to ensure clarity for them. Participatory projects with young people are still reasonably rare within educational research (Moreno et al. 2021), therefore it is unlikely that those involved will have any knowledge or experience with this approach. Furthermore, these types of projects are still typically 'adult-initiated' (i.e., the adult invites the young person to be involved) and so young people may naturally hold established beliefs about their position in the project, despite explicit statements that they will be co-constructors of the research alongside adults (Kennedy, 2018). Breaking down expectations surrounding power and knowledge generation in participatory projects is essential (Jacquez et al. 2013) and emphasises the importance of training adult researchers in participatory research skills so that they can enable and facilitate an atmosphere which positions all contributors as holding equal power and responsibility (Skipper & Pepler, 2021).

3.1.2. Areas of enjoyment

Both feedback forms gathered information about which aspects of the project the panel members most enjoyed. For these young people, working with others and sharing their opinions with each other stood out as key areas of enjoyment. For example:

Just being able to share all of our different ideas

Talking about my love of reading and hearing others' opinions

The experience of working with different people and getting to know more about reading

Panel members' responses also emphasised their curiosity and willingness to learn new things, both from others and from the experience more broadly. For example:

I liked the feeling of discovering something new.

For participatory research to be meaningful and enjoyable to young people, it is important that their priorities and interests are built into projects, as much as possible, while simultaneously creating contexts for them to share their ideas and learn from others (Ozer et al., 2010). Researchers need to develop their understanding of which aspects of the process are most enjoyable and rewarding to young people, and to build this into their future participatory projects.

3.1.3 Collaborative working practices

A key focus of developing collective knowledge about participatory methods is understanding how to optimally structure projects to facilitate successful collaboration. Understanding the young people's perspectives of the practical elements of this project (e.g., meeting organisation and structure) was therefore important.

Scheduling of meetings. Regarding the scheduling of online meetings, panel members responses were generally positive. For example:

> The meetings were very well balanced out and having them at spaced intervals made it a lot easier to be motivated to join them. They were well organised and took place at good times.

Providing flexibility with regard to project structure may be particularly important for young people (Elder et al. 2008). In this project, meetings were spread across the academic year and dates were flexible throughout. Timing of the meetings was informed by young people's availability and their feedback regarding suitable times to meet as the project progressed. In addition, leaving time between sessions for panel members to reflect on the discussions and prepare for future meetings worked well. In discussion with the first author after their interview, one panel member commented that they had many extracurricular commitments outside of school, and that the pace of this project meant they could still contribute alongside their other activities. Acknowledging the time that young people can allocate to a research project and working with them to build a structure that fits with their schedules is essential in ensuring they have access to the process (Heath et al. 2009). Collaborative research projects are fertile ground for experimentation when it comes to ways of working and it is important for all members to remain flexible and open to creativity (Mackney & Young, 2021) and to facilitate this where possible.

Meeting structure. Panel members were also invited to provide feedback on the meeting activities. Regarding the group discussions, one panel member noted that:

I felt comfortable in the meetings [but] it was hard to get input sometimes as there are a lot of people wanting to talk.

While there are benefits to the meeting space being a place of lively discussion (Authors 2021; Levy & Thompson, 2015), it is important to acknowledge that this may not work well for all group members, who may find such a dynamic intimidating. Providing regular and varied opportunities for young people to contribute is essential. For this project, this was facilitated through Google Jamboard™, which was used alongside verbal discussions and allowed anonymous input of ideas and suggestions to a shared remote workspace during and after meetings. However, this type of activity should not act as an alternative to ensuring discussion spaces are equitable; all team members should be able to contribute in ways which are most comfortable for them. It is also important to consider the power dynamics which exist within groups (i.e., between panel members) as well as between them (i.e., between young people and adults) (Cahill, 2013; Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008), and to work to equalise these to ensure equality of access.

3.1.4 Areas for improvement

An important aspect of researcher development is learning from previous examples of participatory research and using these to inform and improve future projects. Reflections from those involved in participatory projects on what could have improved their experience are useful in this respect. However, despite explicitly asking panel members about what could have enhanced their experience in this project, they did not provide suggestions for improvement and were generally very positive about the process. By making collaborative

decisions throughout, it is likely that the project did meet the needs of those involved (Hickey et al. 2018). However, it is also likely that, as this was the first time any of the panel members had been involved in a participatory project, this question was difficult to answer. Working with young people who have experience in collaborative working will be important for critically reflecting on current practices and designing future participatory research with this age group (Ozer et al. 2010).

3.1.5. Project outcomes

To ensure that outcomes from a research project align with the needs and expectations of all involved, it is important to discuss members' hopes for the findings and for future work. In this project, this was the source of discussion for meeting 5 and was reflected in panel members' feedback. Some panel members expressed hopes related to specific outcomes for the project itself:

I hope that it makes in impact on schools and helps encourage more people to read.

I hope that reading will potentially become something more young people participate in.

Whereas other responses related to their hopes for research practices more generally:

I think having young people involved is a very good thing for these types of projects.

Doing more research with other young people.

Notably, there was an emphasis on continuing to work collaboratively with young people to produce outcomes which are beneficial to them. As cited widely in the literature and as noted by one of the panel members, involving young people in research projects is of great importance in order to facilitate research which is relevant to their lives (Jacquez et al., 2013). Allowing young people to take the lead on research projects based on their own interests, (e.g., by co-designing and applying for funding with researchers) would democratise the research process (Blumenthal, 2011; Hodge & Jones, 2000) and enhance the likelihood that outcomes will be relevant, valid and accepted by other young people (Powers & Tiffany, 2006).

3.2. Meetings

Thematic analysis of the panel meetings focused on adult researchers' perspectives of the methodological approach and led to the emergence of five main themes: (1) Panel members as experts; (2) Panel members driving the project; (3) Building relationships: (4) Developing skills; and (5) Valuing the project.

3.2.1. Panel members as experts

A key emphasis within participatory research is that stakeholders should be acknowledged as experts in their own lives (Burke, 2005). To do this, researchers must de-

privilege their own knowledge in favour of centring the voices of those implicated by the research itself. To facilitate an environment where panel members' knowledge and experience could shape the research, the first author regularly emphasised that their ideas and knowledge were central to the project:

> There's been some research about this, but no one's really seeming to be asking young people about it. So that's why we wanted to put together this panel, to get your insights into why *you* think it happens.
>
> *First author, Meeting 1*

> So, what your role will be, essentially, is our, kind of, expert advisors.
>
> *First author, Meeting 1*

Not only is it important to overtly position panel members as experts (by explicitly emphasising that their ideas and experiences are central), but adult researchers must address their own beliefs about where knowledge is held (Moje et al. 2004) and recognise their own relative lack of knowledge in comparison with young people. For the current project, the first author reflected on assumptions which could influence the research and invited panel members to challenge these:

> [W]hen I think about what reading is, I suppose, an image comes to my mind of what I think reading looks like, but it might be different from what you think reading is. So, I thought we could start with a little, sort of, brainstorming activity so we can get your ideas on what *you* think counts as reading.

For researchers, reflecting on and 'letting go' (Kennedy, 2018, p. 302) of implicitly held beliefs about a research topic and providing space those with more knowledge to take the lead is essential in ensuring projects are relevant to those it effects. Such critical self-reflection can be transformative, facilitating changes in perspective and practice (Kennedy, 2018).

3.2.2. Panel members shaping the project

Involving stakeholders at all stages of a project ensures the research is built around their needs and experiences, rather than them 'fitting in' to traditional research procedures (Kellett et al. 2004). This can lead to a creative reimagining of the research process and result in more meaningful research and outcomes (Mackney & Young, 2021). This project was designed to be flexible so that the panel were able to shape the methodological approach, data collection measures, interpretation of the analysis and communication plans for the project.

In discussions about the methodology, panel members suggested that interviewing others their age would provide the greatest insights into their reasons for reading/not reading:

I definitely think, like, talking to people, like, our age and asking them why they maybe don't like reading. And…it would be good to talk to people who like reading as well, to kinda find out why, but I think mostly young people who don't read would be good to talk to.

Panel member A, Meeting 1

Discussing this in more detail, panel members suggested that some young people may feel more comfortable being interviewed by a peer, rather than an adult researcher:

I think some kids especially, like, maybe S1/S2 get quite nervous talking to people and getting interviewed by people, I don't know, but I think if a kid was doing it might be a bit less intimidating.

Panel member D, Meeting 3

Therefore, a collective decision was taken to offer interviewees the option of being interviewed by a peer or by an adult researcher. One panel member proposed that the panel would be best placed to carry out interviews with their peers:

"[I]f there's any way we could, maybe just do some of the interviews with the kids that maybe don't feel as confident about speaking up in front of someone they don't know. That would be good.

Panel member D, Meeting 3

Data collection methodology had not been determined prior to panel discussion and the use of peer interviewing had not been anticipated (although the adult research team did have experience with this approach; Authors et al., 2021). However, due to the flexibility embedded within the project design and the expectation that it would be driven by collective decisions taken at panel meetings, it was possible to pursue this approach.

The interview schedule was also designed collaboratively with the panel, ensuring questions were relevant and language used was age appropriate.

You could ask, like, 'is there anything that stops you from taking the time to read?' 'Cause then we can kind of, like, see if…it might be that reading takes too much time for them or something.

Panel member C, Meeting 2

Yeah, and I think you could just kinda straight up ask people, "do you think reading is nerdy? Do you, do you think it is, like, nerdy or a bad thing to do it?" I think you could just straight up ask people that.

Panel member D, Meeting 2

During the analysis meeting (meeting 4), panel members also gave their own interpretations on which themes were most meaningful to them:

I think it's quite heavily to do with accessibility, like, that's what it seems like.

Panel member C, Meeting 5

[The themes] are all important, but I think helping you to take other people's perspectives is quite a good one. And I also think that, kind of, taking your mind off things going on right now is also another good thing.

Panel member B, Meeting 5

Collaborating with the panel during the initial interpretation of the data ensured that young people's voices were platformed and that the elements which they felt were most meaningful were foregrounded.

3.2.3. Building relationships

Strong relationships are essential for participatory working, not only to foster a comfortable environment within which all members feel welcome and accepted, but also to strengthen interpersonal skills (Bennett & Brunner, 2022). Throughout the project, all contributors demonstrated various ways of building relationships with one another and indicated that meeting new people, building relationships and/or developing their relational skills were key personal outcomes from the project.

Within the meetings, whilst some prompts for discussion were provided by the first author, these often led to conversations between panel members as they built consensus together. For example, in meeting 3, when discussing whether asking celebrities to promote reading would encourage more young people to read for pleasure:

Panel member D: Hmm, I actually think getting celebrities that aren't as well known for reading would be better…I think if you get a celebrity that's not spoken about reading a lot it might, like, get more attention…like, someone, like, that sets lots of trends and stuff like that would be quite good. Quite, like, a well-known celebrity who doesn't read a lot.

Panel member E: Yeah, that's what I was thinking. My first thought went to, like, Marvel, like, actors, basically.

Panel member D: Yeah, something like actors.

Panel member C: Yeah, I can agree with that.

There were also examples of panel members offering different perspectives in a respectful way:

I think, uh, I have a slightly differing opinion…

Panel member C, Meeting 2

Well, I mean yeah, I totally get where you're coming from, but…

Panel member B, Meeting 2

It is important to emphasise that panel members did not know each other or the adult researchers prior to joining project. Despite this, they shared personal experiences, listened to each other's opinions, encouraged one another to share their ideas and offered alternative perspectives. It is to the great credit of the panel that they collaborated so well with one another, and with the adult researchers, to create such a welcoming space. It also emphasises the importance of creating comfortable and equitable spaces which welcome diverse experiences (Cahill, 2013). The first author also aimed to model this, for example, by showing support for panel members' contributions (e.g., 'There's really good ideas on [the Jamboard], thank you everybody.', 'Oh guys, these are such great answers') and welcoming different opinions (e.g., 'Does anyone have a slightly different perspective?').

3.2.4. Developing skills

Panel members indicated that developing skills from their work on the project was valuable to them. Specifically, they referenced how the skills they had gained would be useful in the future (e.g., for putting on their CVs or future applications).

[F]or me, I think, communicating with people because-, and communicating with people that I don't necessarily know very well, isn't one of my strengths, I'm not the best at it usually, but I think talking to people and finding out information about something that I'm quite passionate about has really helped me with that.

Panel member A, Meeting 3

Yeah, and I think like, if we do end up doing some of the interviews, that's like interview skills as well going on our CV, which I think is another good thing to have.

Panel member D, Meeting 3

The first author also made sure to check in regularly with panel members to reflect on whether they felt the project was meeting their needs with regards to developing their skills. After the final meeting, the first author also put together a template for how panel members could report their involvement in the project on a CV and emphasised that they could provide references or advice regarding applications in the future.

The emergence of this theme demonstrates the importance of creating opportunities for young people to join research projects and develop skills which are useful for them. Schäfer and Yarwood (2008) similarly note that vocational training and the opportunity to gain additional qualifications can be key motivators for young people being involved in research. By shifting towards an interdependent view of the self and having a strong relational focus

(Skipper & Pepler, 2021), researchers can facilitate reciprocal learning environments, whereby they are able to 'give back' meaningfully to collaborative stakeholders, who give their own time, knowledge, and energy to a project.

3.3.5. Valuing the project

The final theme to emerge from the thematic analysis relates to the ways in which the project was meaningful to panel members. This relates to themes 3 and 4, as the panel members indicated that developing skills and building relationships were also reasons why taking part in the project had felt valuable to them.

One panel member noted that being asked to join a project affiliated with a university had made being part of the panel valuable:

> I think for me, just being part of the project and, like, I know some of us were actually asked to join, and I think that says quite a lot, like, out of a school of I don't know, maybe a thousand or something, I've got no clue, like, being asked to join a reading panel for the University of [X] sounds quite like impressive.
>
> *Panel member D, Meeting 3*

Others noted that the research topic itself was of importance:

> I think it is worth trying to research why [young people are reading less], because it can really impact us in, like, future generations and stuff because we may not be influencing our own kids to read afterwards.
>
> *Panel member B, Meeting 1*

Panel members also noted that contributing towards something for others their age and having their opinions and ideas listened to were valuable aspects of the experience. It is important to understand the elements of participatory research which are valuable to young people to facilitate mutually beneficial ways of working (Skipper & Pepler, 2021). In this project, not only were the insights, ideas, and expertise shared by young people invaluable to the project and its outcomes, the process was also valuable to the panel members themselves. This also demonstrates the importance of asking stakeholders what they value about their participation and working together to ensure projects achieve this.

4. Reflections and limitations

The benefits and limitations associated with participatory approaches have previously been discussed in studies by Authors (2021), Horgan (2017), Levy and Thompson (2015), Pahl and Allan (2011) and Shaw et al. (2011), among others. However, as working with a young people's advisory panel is a methodology which has not been widely adopted in educational research (Calderón López & Theriault, 2017), it is important to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of this approach.

Planning participatory research timelines

Participatory research relies on strong relationships between collaborative partners (Bennett & Brunner, 2022) and time and care must be taken to develop the trust and understanding necessary to work together. This means that participatory or collaborative research timelines are often longer than those in traditional research projects (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Timelines are also more likely to be 'front-loaded', with more time invested at the early stages to develop relationships and build consensus on research aims and priorities. This is an important consideration for educational researchers thinking about employing participatory

approaches, both when planning project timelines and when applying for funding; additional funds are necessary for the research hours and/or additional costs associated with relationship building activities. This also requires universities and funders to value relationship building as a fundamental part of the research process and to fund it appropriately.

In this project, meetings 1-3 took place on consecutive weeks so that panel members could become familiar with the project scope and with working collaboratively; these meetings provided momentum for ongoing collaboration. Researchers may wish to consider a similar approach, whereby earlier stages of a participatory project have a clear structure and act as the building blocks for subsequent, more flexible work. However, it is important to acknowledge that by predetermining these first interactions, the early stages of involvement are designed by the adult researchers and it is important to consider how much time is reasonable to expect young people to commit to a project. Being explicit about the likely time commitment (and whether this will take in school time or during their free time) allows invited young people to make an informed judgement about whether they wish to participate.

Setting expectations

It is important at the outset of any project – but especially where collaborative partners have different levels of experience with research – that expectations regarding achievable outcomes be set. It is important to establish what each member of the team hopes and expects from a participatory project, and to emphasise any constraints on what can be achieved. For example, in this project, the parameters of the research were limited to the scope of the funding (i.e., adolescent reading motivation). Being clear about constraints at the outset allowed all team members to work together to build the project around a shared set of goals and considerations (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Working in this way meant that panel members and adult researchers were able to share the responsibility for designing a project which fits

within these specifications. It is important to take seriously young people's capacity (Cahill, 2013) and to understand that their opinions on how to deal with difficulty are as just as valuable as those of the adult researchers.

Including diverse and representative voices

Participatory research offers a promising framework for carrying out research with groups whose voices have traditionally been overlooked (Cahill, 2013). For this project, it was important to work with a panel who represented diversity in terms of reading behaviour and motivation so as to include varied perspectives on reading experiences. However, despite also aiming for diversity in terms of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic background, all panel members identified as either White British or White Scottish. While the ideas and opinions expressed by the panel were varied, it is important to acknowledge that working with panel members from different cultural and social backgrounds would have led to different outcomes in terms of their approach to the research and interpretation of the findings. As with any project which aims and claims to be listening to the voice of a stakeholder group, it is necessary to consider the voices which are still not being heard. Indeed, Willis (2002) notes that much motivation research does not consider the variables of race, class, and gender and that the experiences of students of Colour in particular, are often "dispriviliged" (298) by classroom practices which are not culturally relevant. However, simply being a member of a certain identity group (i.e., a young person), does not necessarily make someone an 'expert' in all areas relating to that experience (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2009). While a panel might be representative in some ways (e.g., race, gender), they may also share certain characteristics (e.g., being motivated to participate in research, being supportive of the project aims) which do not represent the population as a whole. Indeed, where self-selection approaches are used, participatory work can 'encourage a reassertion of control and power by dominant individuals

and groups' who possess the skills and/or motivation to engage with the project, or those whose contributions fit within a framework of assumptions regarding the 'right' responses (Kothari, 2001, 142). This emphasises a need to guard against the oversimplification that to involve young people in research necessarily produces more relevant and meaningful outcomes than research methods which do not include them (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008); consideration must always be made to who has access to the space and of the power they hold within it.

Incentives

Sufficiently reimbursing stakeholders for the time and effort they commit to a project is important in acknowledging them as equal to university-employed researchers. Where some members of a research team are salaried employees of their respective institutions and others are either volunteers or being paid at an hourly rate, a power imbalance is necessarily created (Mosse et al. 2001). The difference between paid and voluntary research partners can affect weightings of legitimacy, independence, credibility, control, and ownership (Flinders et al. 2016). Suitable payment is a key means of demonstrating respect and addressing the power imbalance (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019)

With regards to participatory research with young people, the issues associated with payment may be more complex. Payment for involvement may be construed as subtle forms of coercion and providing cash payments may cause young people to feel obligated to contribute in certain ways to 'earn' payment (Heath et al. 2009). However, young people involved in advisory groups for other projects (e.g., TRIUMPH Network Youth Advisory Group) have indicated that receiving payment contributed towards feeling valued in a tangible way and legitimised their involvement as valuable contributors with equal status within the group. Therefore, it is important to discuss payment options with collaborative partners at the outset of any project in order to build consensus regarding the most appropriate means of

reimbursement. For this project, panel members did not indicate that financial reimbursement was important to them; the skills and experience they gained, as well as simply being involved in a project with a university and having this acknowledged, were key incentives. This is not to say that researchers should assume that no young person would want to receive payment for their collaboration; rather it is to emphasise the importance of asking collaborators how they would like to be recognised and reimbursed, rather than making assumptions.

Limitations and future directions

By working with a young people's advisory panel at multiple stages of the research process, this project fits within a participatory paradigm. However, it is important to acknowledge that it still existed within structures which prevented it from being truly driven by young people from start to finish. For example, funding was received prior to the panel being convened, and young people had not been involved in the generation of the proposal. This means that the very conceptualisation of the project likely reflected adult-informed research priorities, rather than those of young people themselves. Involving young people from the outset may have led to the decision that this research topic was not meaningful to them, or the discovery of other topics (perhaps which adults do not recognise/value) that the panel would have preferred to research. Without including stakeholders in the generation of the idea for the research, a project cannot be considered truly co-produced (Farr et al. 2020). Providing opportunities for young people to conduct and take ownership of an entire research project, from conceptualisation to dissemination (e.g., via collaboration between schools and universities, academic work experience etc.) will provide valuable insights into both *what* they feel it is important to research and *how* (Cahill, 2013).

It is also important to note that the experience of working with a young people's advisory panel throughout this project was extremely positive. While this is not a limitation

per se, it reminds us that this project topic perhaps easily aligned with a participatory approach. It is important for researchers to consider the appropriateness of collaborative methods for a particular project (Preston et al. 2019), and not be 'distracted by the ethical allure of "empowerment", "agency" or "self-determination"' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; 501). While participatory approaches work to remove some of the limitations of traditional research practices, like any methodology, careful consideration of appropriateness and suitable training for researchers still need to be adopted to ensure they are not being uncritically deployed.

Conclusion

Participatory methodologies are still relatively underutilised in conducting research about issues involving young people in the field of education. However, when carried out thoughtfully and reflected upon critically, these ways of working have the potential to produce meaningful and sustainable outcomes which centre the needs and experiences of young people themselves. Providing more opportunities for young people, teachers, parents, and policy makers to co-conduct projects alongside researchers is a necessary step in democratising the research process and shifting towards more equitable means of knowledge production.

6. Funding

The XX Project is funded by XX and XX [grant ref]. It is managed by XX.

7. Positionality statement

The adult research team are based within university and literacy charity settings. Their interest in this topic stems from projects related to supporting adolescent reading motivation. Within their research, the team use participatory methods to work alongside young people and teachers in shaping research which is relevant to their needs and experiences. The research team are all white, female and have both research and teaching experience within U.K. settings.

The members of the young people's advisory panel all attend high schools in Scotland. Their reasons for taking part in the project are varied and include an interest in how university research is carried out, a personal love of reading and a desire to help other young people find books they enjoy.

8. Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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