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# Working with a young people's advisory panel to conduct educational research: Young people's perspectives and researcher reflections

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## ABSTRACT

Participatory Action Research (PAR) with young people aims to centre their knowledge and experience in research which is meaningful to them. In recent years, there has been an increase in PAR approaches within education, yet there is still a need for greater 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 project. The panel consisted of 6 young people (13–15-years-old) from 3 geographically dispersed schools in Scotland. The panel worked with researchers at the Universities of Edinburgh and Dundee and a national literacy organisation across one academic year to plan and design the project, carry out data collection, and support interpretation of the findings. In this article, young peoples' perspectives on their role and adult perspectives on the methodological approach of working with a young people's advisory panel on a reading research project are explored. Discussion of the benefits (e.g., challenging systems of power and privilege, producing outcomes which are more relevant to pupils), limitations (e.g., truly disrupting hierarchies of power), and considerations (e.g., planning participatory projects, including diverse and representative voices, and 'bounded empowerment') for researchers interested in convening youth advisory panels for educational research are provided to contribute towards the growing interest in PAR approaches in educational research.

## 1. Introduction

International studies have documented a decline in time spent reading for pleasure amongst adolescents (OECD, 2018). In 2018, 49 % of 15-year-old students in OECD countries reported only reading for pleasure if they "have to", 13 % more than in 2000, and 28 % agreed that reading is a "waste of time" (OECD, 2018; p.78). In the U.K., recent surveys of over 70,000 8–18-year-olds have indicated that reading enjoyment has reached an all-time low (Clark et al., 2023). As reading for enjoyment is linked with reading performance (OECD, 2018), as well as social and emotional outcomes (e.g., Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Eekhof et al., 2022; Howard, 2011), findings such as these have intensified interest in supporting young peoples' reading motivation and engagement worldwide. However, despite

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international data documenting declining reading attitudes and patterns of engagement, young people themselves are rarely included across all stages of research projects which inquire into their reading lives (Jacquez et al., 2013; Moreno et al., 2021).

Participatory action research (PAR) can be conceptualised as a theoretical standpoint and collaborative methodology which serves as a means of engaging marginalized populations and challenging research traditions which uphold hierarchies of power and privilege (Ozer et al., 2010). PAR approaches (and approaches which use associated terminology e.g., community-based participatory research; CBPR) have a long tradition in health and social care, childhood and youth studies, community psychology, and international development (e.g., Farr et al., 2021; Tisdall & Davis, 2006) and are becoming more common in other fields, including in education and literacy research (e.g., Calderón López & Theriault, 2017; Levy & Thompson, 2015; Webber et al., 2022). Considerable work is also being conducted by organisations aiming to support children and young people to be actively involved in research. For example, the Children's Research Centre (U.K.) and the Children's Rights Research Centre (Northern Ireland) produce guidance for empowering children and young people as active researchers and for supporting them to carry out research on topics which are important to them (Children's Research Centre, 2023).

PAR approaches aim to break away from research conventions which uphold unbalanced systems of power and privilege between "the researcher and the researched" (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008; p.121), embarking instead on collective investigations which rely on lived experience and the desire to take individual and/or collective action (Caraballo et al., 2017). For research with young people in particular, power imbalances between researcher and participant are amplified by social and cultural structures which traditionally position adults as holding more power than young people (Heath et al., 2009). Within educational settings in particular, pupils hold relatively less power in comparison with teachers/staff, who are usually positioned as experts in terms of school-based practices and curriculum implementation. PAR approaches with young people (e.g., youth participatory action research; YPAR) therefore require a 'de-privileging' of "researcher only" expertise" (Byrne et al., 2009, p.68), and a challenge to positivist and postpositivist assumptions about who is 'allowed' to conduct research (Cahill, 2007; Caraballo et al., 2017; Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008). As the knowledge generated through education research shapes the priorities of policy and classroom practice (Coldwell et al., 2017; McGeown, 2023), it is vital that young people are at the heart of this work to ensure its' outcomes reflect their needs and experiences.

Different research fields and groups have adopted different approaches for working with young people within a participatory framework. For example, using photo-voice to document secondary school pupils' areas of concern within their school and community (Ozer et al., 2010), developing research questions and interview schedules (Kellett et al., 2004) and conducting peer interviews (Webber et al., 2022). Common across these approaches is (1) a focus on engaging in a cooperative, iterative process of research and action in which adolescents work as researchers and change agents; and (2) power over decisions affecting all phases of the research is shared equitably among all research partners (Ozer et al., 2010). This article explores the approach of working alongside a young people's advisory panel (YPAP) to conduct a reading research project guided by YPAR principles. 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 throughout the project (Farr et al., 2020). Advisory panels work to guide the research process through an ongoing relationship with researchers whereby decisions are made together. Youth advisory panels have been used in other fields (e.g., Moreno et al., 2021; Turnhout et al., 2020) but are still relatively novel within educational research. Additionally, young people's perspectives are not always included in evaluation of the approach. Therefore, we hope this article will contribute towards greater understanding of how young peoples' advisory panels can be used in educational research.

Embedded in contexts of national and international decline in reading enjoyment and engagement (e.g., Cole et al., 2022; OECD, 2018), the youth researchers in this project collaborated with researchers at the University of Edinburgh and Dundee and a national literacy organisation (Scottish Book Trust) to inquire, critique, and explore the barriers they face to reading in their everyday lives and to gain deeper insights into contemporary adolescents' reading motivation. As YPAP involvement in the project begun after funding for this research priority had been allocated, we do not claim that the research is entirely co-constructed (i.e., it did not organically arise from within the community of young people themselves). However, it does represent an approach which challenged traditional means of conducting research with young people, whereby knowledge generation and action was shared between all partners in the project. The reflections from both youth and adult researchers represent useful insights for education researchers seeking to adopt PAR approaches in their work with young people.

We aim not to be aspirational or to romanticise YPAR as being universally or objectively preferable to other research approaches and have tried to highlight the ways in which this project fails to be truly participatory in nature. However, we hope that this account will not only demonstrate the value in involving young people in educational research, but also highlight some of the challenges posed by PAR research initiated by academics. In addition, in the discussion, we note the importance of examining similarities and differences between methodological insights from different projects, as researchers work with YPAPs to understand more about the lives and learning of young people within different settings and contexts.

### 1.1. Research context

'The Young People's Reading Project' is an ESRC-funded 3.5-year project using a PAR-informed approach to explore young people's reading motivation and engagement in collaboration with a national literacy organisation (Scottish Book Trust). This article focusses specifically on the methodological approach of working with a young people's advisory panel to design and conduct the research. This part of the project was preregistered on the Open Science Framework and can be accessed here: <https://osf.io/3jg9c>.

## 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 from 3 geographically dispersed local authority areas in Scotland. The schools were varied in terms of geographic location, number of enrolled students, and SIMD composition (a “tool for identifying areas with relatively high levels of deprivation”, [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2020](#); p.2). Recruitment was supported by the headteacher and/or English teacher in each school, who were asked to provide all eligible pupils (those aged 12–14-years-old) with information about the project. It was emphasised that 2–3 pupils from each school could take part and that the panel should be diverse in terms of gender, reading habits/attitudes, race, and other demographic variables across the 3 schools. Three schools put forward 2 pupils and 1 school put forward 3 pupils to join the panel; of these nine, 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 have complete control over 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 when they became involved in other activities related to the project which had not been previously planned (e.g., data collection, see Procedure).

### 2.2. Procedure

For the project to evolve based on recommendations from the panel themselves, there was no fixed structure determined at the outset (although the research team did preregister a proposed open-ended structure; OSF, <https://osf.io/3jg9c>). Three 1-h-long meetings were initially proposed to discuss plans for the project, with the option for panel members to continue to be involved at later stages, if they wished. All meetings and subsequent activities were optional and panel members could choose which activities to participate in. Involvement in the project would total no more than 20 h over 18 months, and panel members were made aware that they could withdraw from the project at any time. This open-ended structure allowed the project and panel members’ involvement to evolve flexibly, being responsive to ideas and suggestions from the panel themselves. This approach was approved by the University of Edinburgh Ethics committee (approval number: CW29012021-1 ).

In total, five 1-hour meetings and 1 workshop took place over the course of one academic year (see Fig. 1). Meetings were organised using an online scheduling tool and took place online on weekday evenings during term time. All meetings were designed to be interactive, with opportunities for discussion, collaboration, and shared generation of knowledge.

Three initial meetings were scheduled on consecutive weeks at the start of the project. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce panel members to the project, build relationships between panel members and researchers, and collaborate to design the

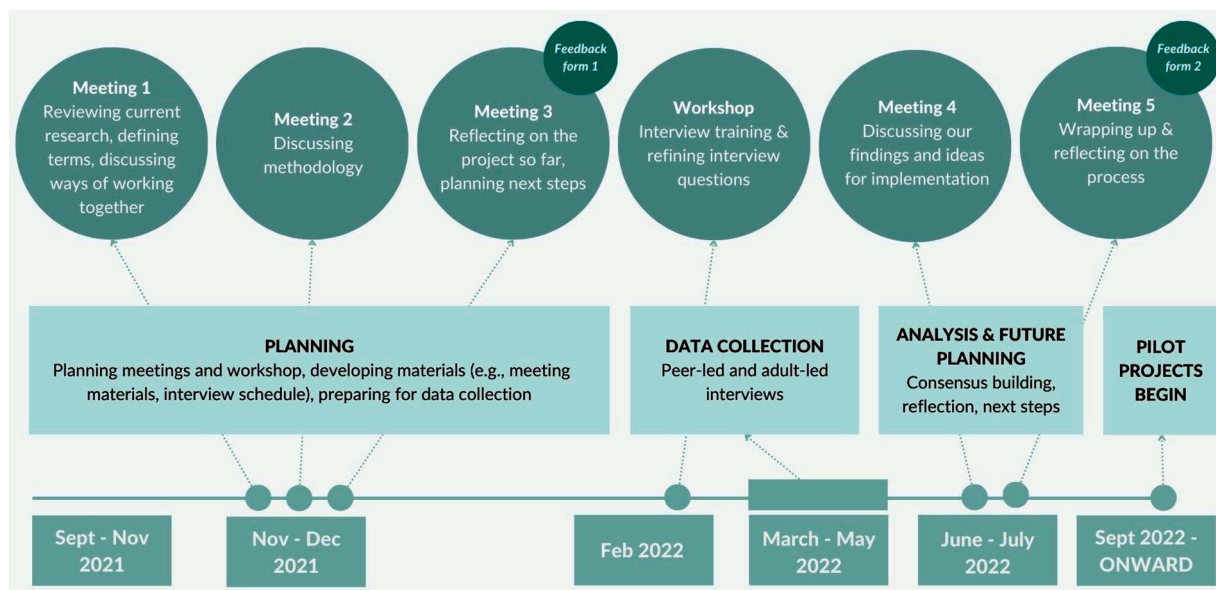


Fig. 1. Overview of young people’s advisory panel activities over the course of the project.

data collection phase of the project. Joint decisions made during these first meetings informed the data collection methodology (semi-structured peer- and adult-led interviews) and panel members' ongoing involvement in the project.

The authors then generated a draft interview schedule based on the consensus definition of reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014) and existing measures of reading motivation (e.g., Motivation for Reading Questionnaire; Wigfield et al., 2004), and shared this with the panel. Panel members recommended adding questions to gain more information about factors they felt were particularly relevant (e.g., in relation to reading being perceived as 'uncool or nerdy'). Following refinement of the interview schedule, 2 panel members requested to interview participants (i.e., be peer-interviewers; the other 4 did not want to interview their peers) and all 6 panel members requested to be interviewed themselves.

As the peer-interviewers requested training in how to conduct interviews, the first author facilitated a workshop which all panel members were invited to attend. The 1-hour, interactive workshop included discussion of ethical guidelines for conducting interviews, as well as opportunities for panel members to contribute their perspectives on important interview skills and procedures. A written summary was also provided after the session.

Following the workshop, all panel members participated in a one-on-one interview with the first author online. The content of these interviews contributed towards the dataset for the project (see OSF, <https://osf.io/xrk6e> for more information; Webber et al., 2023), however the interview itself also served an important methodological purpose: being interviewed themselves gave peer-interviewers an insight into the interview experience and an opportunity to ask for further training or support before conducting interviews themselves (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.

Two panel members then 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 online 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. The first author continued data collection at 5 more schools (due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time of data collection, peer-interviewers could not visit other schools to conduct interviews) until the target number of participants had been reached ( $N = 46$ ) and then began the first stages of thematic analysis, reviewing the interview transcripts and beginning to establish salient themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were presented to panel members at a fourth panel meeting. Panel members provided feedback on the proposed themes, and peer-interviewers shared their interpretations based on the interviews they had conducted. Panel members did not have access to the interview transcripts and any quotes from participants which were shared during the meeting were anonymised. Panel members' input into the findings has been incorporated into articles submitted for review. For example, that issues of access to books, strategies for choice, and free time were significant in understanding declines in free-time reading (e.g., Webber et al., 2023).

A final meeting was held to reflect on the panel members' involvement in the project as a whole (e.g., whether the experience had matched their expectations, what they would like to happen next). They also completed two anonymous feedback forms (one after the third meeting and one after the final meeting). Meeting transcripts and anonymised responses in the feedback forms served as data for analysis of the methodology.

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 Edinburgh, a template for how to write about the project on their CV and are acknowledged on all publications related to the project.

### 2.3. Analysis

With the consent of panel members, video and audio recordings were made during each meeting. A six-step inductive, data-driven 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 before being written up for publication (stage 6). This process was repeated for the anonymous feedback forms. The first author also kept a fieldwork/research journal throughout, documenting relevant observations and reflecting on the process. These reflections are incorporated into the discussion below.

## 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 anonymous feedback forms; and (2) adult reflections on the methodological approach, 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. 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

Responses to the anonymous feedback forms were used to gain insights into panel members' perspectives on their involvement in



the project. Thematic analysis was used to identify five themes: (1) Project expectations; (2) Areas of enjoyment; (3) Collaborative working practices; (4) Areas for improvement; and (5) Project outcomes. Whilst we share panel members' reflections in their own words, we acknowledge that the framing of their responses has been carried out by the adult researchers. We also note that while the feedback forms were anonymous, panel members were aware that their responses would be read by the research team and may have adjusted their feedback accordingly.

### 3.1.1. Project expectations

To inform future PAR 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 aligned with their actual experience. In this project, panel members indicated that their involvement had been different from what they had expected: *"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"*. Interestingly, panel members noted that they had been involved "more" than they had expected (i.e., having discussions and contributing towards decisions, rather than "just listening"). The mismatch between panel members' 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 made 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. Indeed, the fact that panel members requested research methods training (to conduct interviews) from the adult research team perhaps indicates their assumptions or expectations about the power hierarchy within the relationship (i.e., that the adult researchers held the authority on these methods). Additionally, 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. Indeed, none of the panel members had taken part in a PAR project before, and so did not have a point of reference for how their involvement might look: *"this is the first time I've done it so I didn't know what to expect really"*.

Young people's roles in PAR projects should be clearly communicated from the outset so they know what to expect and can make an informed judgement about their participation. In the current project, the panel members expressed that they valued being more actively involved, but some young people might have preferred to have had a less active role and found it harder to participate if they were expected to contribute more actively. Indeed, the researchers acknowledge that they made assumptions (and had hopes about) the level of contribution to expect from panel members, and that this may not have aligned with what panel members themselves felt comfortable with.

Furthermore, as these types of projects are still typically 'adult-initiated' (i.e., the adult invites the young person to be involved and often imposes a structure upon how their participation will look), young people may naturally hold pre-established beliefs about their expected involvement, even when researchers try to emphasise their role as co-constructing the research alongside adults (Kennedy, 2018). Breaking down expectations surrounding power and knowledge generation in participatory projects is essential (Jacquez et al., 2013), yet difficult given societal norms which position adults as necessarily having more power than young people (Heath et al., 2009). This emphasises the importance of researchers (both adults and young people) having robust knowledge of PAR principles so that they can co-design projects which position all contributors as holding equal power and responsibility (Skipper & Pepler, 2021) and have the knowledge and skills to reflect on and challenge their own positionality, and that of others, in collaborative research relationships. This may involve discussions between co-researchers about PAR principles and how they relate to the proposed collaboration prior to the commencement of research activities and/or training for all members of the research team regarding PAR principles and practices.

### 3.1.2. Areas of enjoyment

As well as serving a research function, it is important that PAR projects are enjoyable for collaborators. In the current project, 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: *"Just being able to share all of our different ideas"*; *"Talking about my love of reading and hearing others' opinions"*. Panel members' responses also emphasised their curiosity and willingness to learn new things, both from others and from the experience more broadly: *"The experience of working with different people and getting to know more about reading"*; *"I liked the feeling of discovering something new"*.

For PAR projects to be meaningful and enjoyable for 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). Sharing what young people found most rewarding is a priority, as PAR projects should have an emphasis upon process (Cahill, 2007), not just on research 'outcomes'. Including young people as partners in research requires a movement away from viewing them as "assets" (Cahill, 2007; p.298), towards building their capacity to transform their own lives and communities.

### 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; anonymous feedback forms specifically asked panel members about these logistical aspects of the project.

Regarding the scheduling of online meetings, panel members responses were generally positive: *"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 regarding 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 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, 2022) and to facilitate this where possible.

Panel members were also invited to provide feedback on the meeting activities. Regarding the group discussions, one panel member noted that they "*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 (Webber et al., 2022; Levy & Thompson, 2015), it is important to acknowledge that this may not work well for all group members. Providing regular and varied opportunities for young people to contribute is essential. For this project, this was facilitated through an interactive online workspace (Google Jamboard™), which was used alongside verbal discussions and allowed anonymous and non-verbal input of ideas 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, 2007; 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 YPAR and using these to inform and improve future projects. Reflections from those involved in participatory projects about 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 more likely that the project met 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. Panel members expressed hopes related to specific outcomes for the project itself: "*I hope that it makes an impact on schools and helps encourage more people to read*"; "*I hope that reading will potentially become something more young people participate in*". They also referred to their hopes for research practices more generally: "*I think having young people involved is a very good thing for these types of projects*"; "*[In the future I'd like to see] researchers 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 for facilitating research which is relevant to their lives (Jacquez et al., 2013; Kellett et al., 2004). Supporting 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. Adult reflections on the methodological approach

As working with a young people's advisory panel is a relatively novel approach in reading research, thematic analysis of the panel meeting transcripts was carried out to identify themes relevant to the methodological approach. Thematic analysis led to the identification of four themes: (1) Positioning panel members as experts; (2) Collaborative decision making; (3) Building relationships; and (4) Developing skills.

### 3.2.1. Positioning panel members as experts

A key emphasis within PAR projects is that stakeholders' knowledge and expertise regarding issues that are relevant to them should be valued in research about those issues. This requires academic researchers to de-privilege their own knowledge in favour of that held by members of the community. In the context of this project, to facilitate an environment where panel members' felt that their knowledge and experience was valued the first author regularly emphasised that their ideas and knowledge were central to the project: "*There's been some research about [the drop-off in reading motivation in adolescence], 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*"; "*So, what your role will be, essentially, is our, kind of, expert advisors*". Not only was it important to overtly position panel members as experts (by explicitly emphasising that their ideas and experiences are central), but the adult researchers also had to 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. In the current project, the first author did this openly in meetings and provided opportunities for panel members to challenge the assumptions

that they thought adults might have about reading: “So, when 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...I want to get your ideas on what you think counts as reading, because it might be different from mine and this is about what you think counts”. In their reflective journal, the first author also wrote: “We’re talking mainly about books. I know we gave them the opportunity to share what they thought ‘counted’ as reading, but I’m worried they’re focussing on books because they still think that’s the kind of reading that I think is important”. This speaks to issues of power; implicitly held beliefs about the authority of researcher expertise (on behalf of both young people and adult researchers) can continue to shape the project even when the intention is to break down hierarchical power structures. Turnhout et al. (2020) speaks of shifting to debates about power which emphasise the need for all stakeholders to be “empowered to generate something new” (p.17), which will inevitably entail a degree of disempowerment of academics.

### 3.2.2. Collaborative decision making

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, 2022). 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 dissemination plans for the project. We note that the scope for making decisions about the project was largely defined by the adult research team (i.e., decision-making was most often initiated by adult researchers at pre-defined points in the project, rather than being initiated by panel members). Furthermore, although we sought to be led by panels’ suggestions and incorporated them where possible, we ultimately held power over the final decisions. We also note that we were able to accommodate most recommendations made by the panel as they fit within the project scope, timeline, and funding; had panel members made recommendations that did not fit so well within these parameters, this power dynamic would have been made much more evident.

However, it is important to reflect on how decisions about the project were made collaboratively, as it highlights the ways in which input from young people can shape the development of a project methodology. For example, panel members felt that interviewing others their age (both readers and non-readers) 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” (A).

One panel member suggested that some young people may feel more comfortable being interviewed by a peer, rather than an adult researcher and that “if a kid was doing [the interviewing] it might be a bit less intimidating” (D). However, another panel member thought that interviewees might be embarrassed to talk to a peer about reading and that they might be more honest if being interviewed by a researcher. Therefore, a collective decision was taken to offer interviewees the option of being interviewed either by a peer or by an adult researcher. 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; Webber et al., 2022). 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.

As noted above, the interview schedule was also designed collaboratively with the panel, ensuring questions reflected the issues that the panel felt were important: “You could ask, like, ‘is there anything that stops you from taking the time to read?’ Because then we can kind of, like, see if...it might be that reading takes too much time for them or something.” (C); “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.” (D). Providing opportunities for the panel to shape the interview questions meant that the final schedule was more likely to be aligned with the experiences of the interviewees, rather than being based on adult assumptions about which avenues to explore.

### 3.2.3. Building relationships

Strong relationships are essential for PAR projects, 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...” (C); “Well, I mean yeah, I totally get where you’re coming from, but...” (B). It is important to emphasise that panel members did not know each other or the adult researchers prior to joining the project. Despite this, they shared personal experiences, listened to each other’s opinions, encouraged one another to share their ideas and offered alternative perspectives. The first author 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?'), however 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. We emphasise here that our experience of working with a young people's advisory panel was extremely positive. While this is not a limitation per se, it reminds us that this project perhaps easily aligned itself with a PAR 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; p.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 and we do not want to create the false impression that collaborative spaces will always be harmonious.

#### 3.2.4. Developing skills

Panel members indicated that developing skills from their work on the project was an especially valuable outcome. This links to the above point that ensuring PAR projects are meaningful to all partners (outwith the outcomes themselves) is essential. In the current project, young people referenced skills they had gained and how these would be useful in the future: "[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." (A); "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." (D). With this in mind, 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 identification of this theme also demonstrates the importance of creating opportunities for young people to join research projects which support them to develop skills which are useful beyond the project itself. Schäfer and Yarwood (2008) 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.

## 4. Considerations and limitations

As interest in PAR approaches grows, there has been much discussion of the benefits and limitations associated with PAR projects (e.g., see Horgan, 2017; Levy & Thompson, 2015; Pahl & Allan, 2011; Shaw et al., 2011; and Turnhout et al., 2020 among others). However, as working with a young people's advisory panel is a relatively novel methodology in educational research (Calderón López & Theriault, 2017), it is important to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of this approach.

### 4.1. Planning 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. When working with a panel of collaborators, especially where group members do not know each other, this process requires even more time. In hindsight, we would have liked to have dedicated more time to relationship building with the panel prior to starting focussed research activities. However, even without additional time to deepen connections at the start, the project already spanned an entire academic year and it is important to consider how much time is reasonable to expect young people to commit to a project alongside full-time study (and perhaps other extracurricular activities). This is an important consideration for educational researchers thinking about working with a panel when planning project timelines. This also requires universities and funders to value relationship building as a fundamental part of the research process and to facilitate flexible research timelines which accommodate this.

### 4.2. Including diverse and representative voices

Participatory research offers a promising framework for carrying out research with groups whose voices have traditionally been overlooked (Cahill, 2007). For this project, we were able to work with a panel who represented diversity in terms of reading behaviour and motivation, which was important in terms of varied perspectives on reading being represented. However, despite also aiming for diversity in terms of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic background, all panel members identified as either White Scottish or White British. While the ideas and opinions expressed by the panel were varied, it is important to acknowledge that young people from different cultural, social, and educational backgrounds would have brought different knowledge and experience to the project, which would have led to different outcomes. We also note the overrepresentation of female panel members ( $N = 5$ ) in comparison with males ( $N = 1$ ); seeking the perspectives of boys is especially important given that their decline in reading engagement and enjoyment during adolescence has been identified as being greater than in girls (e.g., Cremin, 2023). 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 “disprivileged” (p.298) by classroom practices which are not culturally relevant.

Furthermore, panel members may also share certain characteristics (e.g., being motivated to participate in research, being supportive of the project aims) which do not represent the whole population (Bucknall, 2012). 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, p.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.

#### 4.3. Bounded empowerment

As noted above, despite being informed by PAR principles it is important to acknowledge the ways in which this project still existed within structures which prevented it from being truly driven by young people from start to finish. Ozer et al. (2013) define ‘bounded empowerment’ where young people engaged in YPAR projects are still constrained by the power held by adults, especially over the initial selection of an issue of inquiry and the planning and implementation of actions based on research. In the current project, 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. 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 as well as *how* (Cahill, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

Increasing attention is being paid to the use of YPAR and participatory methodologies in educational research across different countries and contexts. 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. For example, working with young people to design and evaluate educational programmes and/or curricula could ensure these better fit their needs. PAR projects also offer opportunities for both adult and young researchers to develop skills, build relationships, and contribute towards shared knowledge generation. This project provides novel insights into working with a Young People’s Advisory Panel to plan and conduct educational research, reflecting on the perspectives and experiences of both the young people and the researcher, in addition to the considerations associated with this methodological approach. Providing more opportunities for children, young people, teachers, parents, and policy makers to co-conduct projects alongside educational researchers is a necessary step in democratising research and shifting towards more equitable means of knowledge production.

### Biographical note

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.

### Rights retention statement

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### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Charlotte Webber:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Katherine Wilkinson:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Lynne G. Duncan:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision. **Sarah McGeown:** Conceptualization,

Funding acquisition, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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