
Article:
Little, S. orcid.org/0000-0002-9902-0217, Raine, H., Choo, A. et al. (5 more authors) (2024) 'The power to SAY what I want to and it gets written down': Situating children's and adults' voices and silence in participatory research. British Educational Research Journal, 50 (3). pp. 964-980. ISSN 0141-1926

https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3966

Received: 16 March 2023 | Accepted: 14 December 2023

DOI: 10.1002/berj.3966

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

BERJ BERA

‘The power to SAY what I want to and it gets written down’: Situating children's and adults' voices and silence in participatory research

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Funding information
Holistic Thinktank

Abstract

This paper, co-authored between three adults and five children aged 8–11, adopts a ‘collaborative writing as inquiry’ approach to examine and discuss the authors' experiences of a participatory research project through the lens of critical dialectical pluralism. In the original project, children formed two ‘young advisory panels’, one online, comprising children from all over England, and one in a primary school in a suburban area in North England, informing and collaborating on the creation of 45 educational activities supporting critical digital literacy. Rather than focusing on the original research itself, the paper focuses on making a methodological contribution, through detailed and collaborative reflections on notions such as agency, power and control. Over a period of four 60 to 90 min-long meetings once the actual research was completed, adult and child authors considered their respective roles in the project, as well as detailing their understanding of the project as a whole. In co-framing our perceptions of participatory research, we problematise adult anxieties and highlight the importance of exploring ‘silence as voice’, arguing for an extension to participatory research projects, going beyond the research itself and creating a ‘third space’ which is un/familiar to all participants, openly inviting engagement with discomfort and normalising uncertainty.

KEYWORDS
children, co-authorship, participatory research, third space

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

We conceptualise the notion of participatory research through the lens of critical dialectical pluralism, focusing on the perspectives of both adults and children, by teasing out complexities surrounding our perceptions and anxieties. Collaboratively, we problematise how notions of power, control and agency are experienced, particularly by the child co-authors, and probe adult researcher anxieties around 'successful' participatory research.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper situates silence as a powerful message within participatory research and argues for the exploration of silence as a means of conceptualising how children experience power, control and agency in the participatory research context. In exploring our experiences through co-authorship, we additionally offer the concept of co-authorship with children as a potential tool to minimise adult interpretations of children's voices.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a project which engaged young children (aged 8–11) in co-developing a series of interdisciplinary pedagogical activities focused on the topic of critical digital literacy. As members of either an offline or online 'young advisory panel' (YAP), children contributed their thoughts and ideas as experts of their lived experiences, and gave feedback on the resulting activities. This paper offers a methodological continuation of the project, working collaboratively with five of the children as co-authors. Collectively, we theorise our positions as adults and children in the participatory research process, situating ourselves in both current (Holmes & Ravetz, 2023; Pahl, 2023) and historical (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) literature. We explore notions of child agency and power relationships, asking:

- How is participatory research with young people (aged 8–11) experienced by the young people in question?
- How can notions of power, agency and control be navigated in this context?

Historically, there has been significant epistemological and ontological ambivalence on the role children both should and can play in participatory research with adults. While the concept of children having the right to participation and influence over issues and decisions that directly impact on them is one that has only grown in dominance since the publication of Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including in educational practice and research, there have been questions about how it can meaningfully be understood as either a theoretical good in and of itself (Davidson, 2017; Lundy, 2018) or as a way to drive

change in practice (Billington, 2006; Lundy, 2007). While children can be theoretically recognised as holders of 'expert knowledge', especially when it comes to curriculum design (Barratt & Hacking, 2008), or as 'knowledge brokers' between other children and researchers (Marsh, 2012), they are simultaneously conceptualised by adult gatekeepers merely as 'knowledge receivers' who require adult support or mediation to correct their 'misconceptions' (Hunleth, 2011).

Several recent works come from the field of critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013), acknowledging the links between participatory research and social justice, and re-centring notions of 'good' or 'bad' research (Holmes & Ravetz, 2023) by focusing primarily on what it means to be a child in certain contexts (Pahl, 2023; Schaefer et al., 2021), rather than viewing the child as a go-between between the researcher and knowledge. Significantly, meaning is co-constructed with children, a process we extended through co-reflections on the process of research itself, via a process of co-authorship (Little & Little, 2022; Schaefer et al., 2021).

This paper refers to the original project (which involved four online and four face-to-face YAP sessions) and draws on data from ongoing collaborations via an additional four meetings with five of the young people involved, where the processes and experiences were discussed in detail. A fifth meeting was held following feedback from reviewers. In reflecting on Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) warning not to view participatory research as 'epistemologically fool-proof', in this paper, co-authored with the five children, we thus take the liberty of reconceptualising the 'problem space' (Lury, 2021), arguing that, by engaging in and examining a collaborative addition to the main research project, we are able to better theorise children's understandings of notions like 'power' and 'agency', and can more usefully interpret, in particular, the silences between our conversations. Through co-authorship, we created a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) and a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1989) which allowed us to reflect on our respective experiences and interpretations of participatory research. Specifically, the co-authorship sessions gave child authors the opportunity to frame their experience of the research in their own words, rather than 'adult-informed frames of reference shap[ing] the analysis of children's voices' (Spencer et al., 2020, p. 3).

I feel like I could suggest things to you and that you would consider my ideas or opinion. However, I do not think that I have the power to decide or directly change things. I also feel important because I played a role in doing a good cause. It also makes me feel proud when I see my name linked to a worthwhile project. (Ayden)

Together, we thus extend the understanding of participatory research, examining its benefits and limitations from our individual perspectives as adults and children (Montreuil et al., 2021). While third-space theory is frequently used in research with children, particularly in multicultural contexts (Tatham, 2023), we argue that the collaborative approach of co-authorship, aligned with critical dialectical pluralism, offers new conceptualisations for participatory research methodology, improving all participants' (children and adults alike) understanding of the research process and its inherent complexities.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In order to understand some of our discussions, it is important to understand the context of the original participatory research project itself. The initial project involved the development of 45 interdisciplinary pedagogical activities with a particular focus on critical digital literacies. Finding consensus on this concept of critical digital literacy/ies is not always simple (Pangrazio, 2016; Poveda, 2020). Digital literacy, just as 'literacy' itself, carries with it certain social and cultural values (Barton et al., 2000; Street, 1984), and this has an impact on how

it is understood and taught. In this project, we understand the development of specifically *critical* digital literacies as combining the teaching of the skills and competencies needed to interact confidently with digital technologies, alongside and enmeshed with a development of children's cultural understanding of these technologies and *explicit* teaching of critical thinking skills to support interaction with the digital world as creators and consumers (Horn & Veermans, 2019).

Therefore, for our study, we wished to work with children first to establish their understanding of and interest in digital technology, and linked social and cultural practices they have experienced alongside it. We then used this knowledge to support the development of activities which would reflect what they told us and which we believed might support these critical digital literacies, before gathering their feedback on these activities. This approach to curriculum planning drew on the Funds of Knowledge (González et al., 2005) approach, which acknowledges and foregrounds the home languages, cultures and personal experiences of children as necessary to be included within the curriculum. Following our work with the children, we developed a set of activities which aimed to support their capacity to feel *purposeful* and *safe* using digital media both online and offline. These were areas which were important to them, and reflected both children's (and adults') concerns surrounding digital technologies, but also the necessity of them developing the skills to use them, reflecting what Poveda (2020) describes as the *challenges*, *complexities* and *imperatives* surrounding young children's digital literacies and practices.

THE CONCEPT OF CO-AUTHORSHIP

Since co-authorship with young children remains fairly uncommon, we begin by outlining the underlying principles, as well as the processes linked to the authoring of this paper.

In recent years, the role of young people, and especially children, as co-authors in academic journals has been under discussion, partially influenced by the United Nations (2009). Academic publications are an arena where adults have traditionally spoken for children and interpreted their views, although exceptions exist: in a scientific paper based on an experiment conducted with a primary school class, the children are listed as co-authors and the paper focuses entirely on the experiment, rather than drawing on background literature (Blackawton et al., 2011), ensuring that children were able to grasp and contribute to every aspect of the research process. Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2013) link the facilitation of participants, particularly children, to take on an active role in the dissemination of findings, to critical dialectical pluralism, an approach that centres around social justice. In a paper spanning a 2.5-year autoethnographic research study, a mother and son explored their respective experiences of growing up bilingual and bringing up a bilingual child, engaging with methodological issues in the process (Little & Little, 2022). For Little and Little (2022), the long-term parameters of the project, and the close familial relationship, facilitated the child's engagement with theoretical concepts. Their research extended the concept of a 'third space' to one that is un/familiar—familiar and unfamiliar at the same time (i.e., questioning perceived roles and agency within these). This paper seeks to adopt a middle ground and so, over a period of four meetings, five of the children involved in the participatory project (Shanza, Grace, Ronia, Ayden and Sarah) continued to meet with the three researchers (Sabine, Ailin and Hannah) to plan the writing of the paper, both in terms of what would be discussed (concepts) and how we would write it (process). All the children volunteered to be co-authors, for different reasons. '*To me it means that I have the power to SAY what I want to and it gets written down. Also, it tells me that I can say what I want to but also it tells me that my voice is being heard*' (Shanza). Although, for space reasons, we frequently refer to 'child authors' and 'adult authors' in the paper, we want to avoid homogenising both respective groups;

each of the authors composed a brief self-description, following a discussion around 'what is important for people to know about me?'

The full list of authors, their ages at the beginning of the study, their self-descriptions (unaltered) and the panel they were originally part of, is presented in Table 1.

Our four group meetings, each lasting between 60 and 90 min, featured both recorded discussions and writing activities. A fifth meeting, lasting 60 min, was scheduled to discuss and address some of the reviewers' comments. A shared document was accessible via Google Docs between meetings and during the writing process, so that the child authors could choose how to share their views and had space to reflect and edit their thoughts. Their contributions, both taken from their written contributions and their spoken words, are shared in italics throughout the paper, to indicate original authorship, while the adult authors wrote 'around' the child authors' voices, adding literature, as well as their own experiences, whilst also providing—with permission—limited editing to the child authors' contributions to ensure grammatical and spelling accuracy (and checked with the child authors before submission). The child authors' contributions formed the basis of further discussion, allowing a joint discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2018), but ultimately adopting collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Gale & Wyatt, 2017). Since, as outlined above and below, collaborative writing with children remains relatively rare, we had to decide collectively how to present our joint reflections, including authorship and voice.

The child authors unanimously felt that the distinction between adult and child voices should be made and that '… *it would be good if we did see what the children have written in different font or something so they* [the reader] *can see what the children have written, what the adults have written and so they can see the difference in views*' (Ronia). '*I think also there should be a difference. Like the font or the colour should be different for adults and children. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand. You might get mixed up, the reader who's reading it*' (Shanza). This approach to writing felt the most honest to us, since, as Murris and Osgood (2022) warn, an insistence on complete entanglement of adults and children may ultimately lead to the erasure of the child altogether. All co-authors had the chance to read and edit their views before submission of the paper. In the following, we give a brief outline to the background of the study, before exploring the key themes of participatory research, including power, agency and voice, via the literature and from our experiences of the project.

PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND

In order to be clear on processes, this section briefly outlines the methods employed in the original curriculum development project, before moving on to the extension work specifically related to this paper. To support the original project, two YAPs were recruited, one face-to-face via a primary school and one online via social media posts and word of mouth. Both YAPs (face-to-face and online) met four times respectively, in 60 to 90-min sessions, covering roughly the same topics (e.g., social media habits, agency and power through digital technology, consumption vs. creation of content, safety and trust online), but led by children's input and different affordances of the physical contexts. For the face-to-face panel, led by Hannah, sessions were held during school hours in a small primary school in a suburb just outside the centre of a large city in the North of England. The school has a higher-than-average intake of students who are classified as 'disadvantaged', a high number of students with a special educational needs and disabilities diagnosis and more than half of students speak English as an additional language. The sessions took place in a separate classroom with a teacher present and at least one member of the research team. The online sessions, led by Ailin and Sabine, took place via Google Meet, usually during Sunday evenings to accommodate the various schedules of the YAP. A parent would be present in the room as

TABLE 1 List of authors.

Name	Age	Panel: Online or face-to-face	Self-description
Shanza	8	Online	I am multilingual (I speak Urdu—my native language, Arabic and I am slowly learning French). In the future I hope to become a doctor. My hobbies are coding, baking, story writing, watching TV and reading many books.
Grace	9	Online	I enjoy reading, especially adventure stories, and learning about myths and legends. I like singing, dancing and acting and have just played the role of little Simba in the Lion King. In the future, I would like to be an author and illustrator and want to travel—top of my list is Norway because it sounds magical with the mountains, forest and glaciers! I love cats and otters.
Ronia	12	Online	I am both German and English, with a bit of Indian on my dad's side. I love visiting my family in Germany every summer, and I enjoy reading Greek myths and stories like Percy Jackson and *Stone Blind*. I have just finished my first year of secondary, and I have been doing artistic rollerskating since the age of 3. I skate for Great Britain, and even came third in last year's championships!
Ayden	8	Online	I speak English and French, and currently I am learning Spanish and German using Duolingo. My hobbies are playing chess, coding, reading and drawing. My favourite food is sushi. When I grow up, I want to become a zoologist.
Sarah	8	Face-to-face	I am multilingual and I speak Iranian, Spanish, French, Polish and English and I am the only person in my whole family to speak perfect English. When I grow up, I want to be a travelling pharmacist so I can go to other places to help people and get souvenirs for me and my family. My favourite food is caramel (salted or any other flavour). My favourite things to learn are science and English. I personally am learning the periodic table in science at home and I just enjoy the elements and I really enjoy working with Sheffield. I hope all of you enjoyed my description of me. Bye!
Ailin	34	Online	I am an immigrant currently living in the United Kingdom. I am bilingual (Malay and English). Although I am ethnically Chinese, I do not speak any of the Chinese dialects. I grew up attending the state school system in Malaysia, however, a lot of my tertiary education and my later teaching experience (international secondary schools in Malaysia) has been within the British system. My research interests are multilingualism and civic identity. I also work with children as a theatre chaperone and in other pastoral capacities.
Hannah	33	Online/face-to-face	I am a monolingual English-speaking British citizen. I am a primary teacher and a Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages and I have taught in settings in England and Australia. As a researcher, I explore the teaching of reading to students in English primary schools from the perspective of literacy as a social practice. I am also mother to a dual-heritage British/Australian child and wife of an Australian immigrant.
Sabine	47	Online	I am a first-generation academic from a working-class background. I'm a trained teacher and an immigrant myself (from Germany to the United Kingdom, nearly 30 years ago). I am bilingual, and much of my research focuses on multilingualism, identity and belonging, and children's agency in the process of growing up multilingual. I am also Mum to a teenager.

the session went on. All sessions were recorded and transcribed by the adult researchers. These recordings and transcriptions were revisited throughout the development of the pedagogical activities to identify key themes.

The sessions would usually start with semi-structured questioning, which served to raise topics that the YAP would then discuss. In the face-to-face panel, participatory techniques were used—such as drawing and an interpretation of a participatory concept mapping activity—with the children using Post-it notes to write down, group and rank their ideas and use them as a prompt for questioning and discussion (Fairbrother et al., 2022; Jessiman et al., 2021; Woodrow et al., 2022). In the online sessions, participatory concept mapping was also used with the assistance of Google Jamboard. The YAP were invited to engage with the discussion in whichever way they felt most comfortable, taking into account that not every technique is appropriate or suitable for every child and that this would vary depending on the situation (Coyne & Carter, 2018). This focus on dialogue is further central to critical dialectical pluralism, where the focus is on centring participant-researchers and creating contexts that foreground the needs of participant-researchers (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013).

The study had ethics approval for both the initial YAP, as well as the continuing collaboration, with both parents and children consenting to the children's participation, and both activities being voluntary. Following the final submission of the pedagogical activities (and thus the official 'end' to the participatory research project), five children across both panels expressed an interest in further exploring the concept of participatory research (and our respective roles within it). These children, and the adult researchers, attended the additional four meetings, as described in the section on co-authorship above, jointly shaping our approach to examining and writing up our experiences. In the following, we turn to the literature on participatory research, interspersed with child and adult author reflections taken from the transcripts of our co-authoring sessions and the linked writing activities.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN: CO-FRAMING THE WORK

As highlighted in the Introduction, conceptualisations of participatory research, especially with children, are the focus of much ongoing discourse. 'Authentic' participatory research is framed as a means by which adult researchers, understood as the holders of power, relinquish (some of) that power in order to empower children, 'giving' or even 'allowing' agency and voice to often excluded groups, in this instance, children (Grover, 2004), in a way that other types of research do not. '*Usually in classes, you're kind of scared to disagree if you know what I mean. But I think here it was really good because we were able to disagree, able to share our thoughts*' (Ronia). '*I think we can openly disagree with you because I trust you enough to disagree with you*' (Ayden). This experience of school, in contrast to the experience of participatory research through this project, is explored further within the context of power dynamics. Indeed, the validity of participatory research can be judged by the 'extent' to which this is done, and the ways that this can be quantified using a scale or ladder (e.g., Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001). More recently, Shier's (2019) participation matrix explores the extent to which children are involved in all aspects of the participatory research project, from initial conceptualisation through to disseminating findings and influencing policy, problematising notions of agency and voice.

Considering Shier's participation matrix and its focus on involving children in all aspects of the research process, while the original project was conceptualised by adults (as part of the funding call to develop cross-curricular activities and the decision to focus on critical digital literacy), the subsequent work took place collaboratively with children. The three adult researchers (Sabine, Hannah and Ailin) interacted with the YAPs in two ways, on the one

hand, to capture and gather ideas about what aspects of critical digital literacy young people may be interested in, and on the other hand, gathering feedback about some of the activities that were developed based on the original input. Thus, while the initial YAP sessions focused on content, the subsequent sessions focused on process, specifically by expanding our understanding of the participatory research process. Although we were not able to involve the YAP in the conceptualisation of the project, we sought to understand how the YAP saw themselves in relation to the adult researchers and their involvement and contributions to the project. Gormally and Coburn (2014), in their examination of the connection between youth work and research practices, discuss how collaborative construction of knowledge by young people and youth workers requires time and critical and reflective dialogue. Our critical discussions on process enable us to contribute to understanding how participatory research is experienced and interpreted by different collaborators, explicitly taking a pause to reflect and draw out differences between us, rather than looking to argue for equal positioning of all involved (Murris & Osgood, 2022). Key to this is a reflection on not only our words, but also our silences, uncomfortable and otherwise. In doing so, we contribute to informing the design and approaches to future participatory research projects, especially in projects where it is difficult to involve participants at the bid stage, by examining and reflecting on situated power and agency as research proceeds. This focus on process allows for an epistemology where space is given for a plurality of perspectives on the emerging picture of what is being examined.

In our author sessions, therefore, we chose to explore whether the adults' understanding of what had happened was the same as the children's. This question had originated from reflections within the adult researcher team on the contributions in their respective YAPs; where there was a sense that following four meetings there was not unanimous understanding of the focus on 'process', this raised some misgivings for the researchers and reflected a wider problematisation of participatory research with children by qualitative researchers (e.g., Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Lundy, 2007; Papadopoulou & Sidorenko, 2022; Robinson, 2011; Spencer et al., 2020; Spyrou, 2011, 2016). In our discussions, it turned out that the dual role children played—as initial discussion partners and, later, sounding boards for completed activities—was confusing. The fact that they were needed was clear, '… *they needed us because they needed help on a project and they couldn't do it without children's ideas*' (Sarah), but the process was less transparent. '*I think we've been learning about media and how to use it safely and carefully, and for a project we need children's views on it, and what they think media is about, how they think they should use it safely and responsibly*' (Ronia). Most of the children held on to their traditional roles as 'learners' in adult–child relationships, interpreting their role differently from the adult researchers, who viewed the children as sounding boards and conversation partners.

I actually do think you are teachers. Because you work for Sheffield. And, what happens is you do online videos and Hannah came to my school just to teach us. And they needed help on the project. Which probably means, you are teachers and you're probably not teachers, so it's kind of like in the middle or it's like a mixture of both. (Sarah)

Another aspect that became obvious is that the child authors had very much experienced our panel meetings as 'in the moment', just a small part of their busy lives. So, when we expected them to reflect back on a meeting that had occurred a month earlier, Ayden rightly explained '… *that was a long time ago*, *I barely remember what happened*'. The ways that they understood their roles as part of the larger team was also uncertain. In her thoughts about the project, Sarah first excludes, then includes the child authors in the project team who worked on the tasks. '*I think **you** did a really good job with it, because **you** are making children more interested in learning. With this project, maybe **we** could make more children even more interested in learning and **we** could teach them a lot of stuff*' (Sarah, emphasis added).

This in turn led to broader questions on how the child authors experienced agency, power and control. Papadopoulou and Sidorenko (2022) discuss the paradoxes of participatory narrative problematising the actual dispersal of power, focusing on the different webs of relationships, power structures and its influences on agentic expression in children. In one of the co-author sessions, we discussed the concept of agency explicitly. As the child authors were unfamiliar with the terminology itself, we defined agency, in relation to this project, as children being able to act independently, with awareness and deliberately, towards achieving a goal and being in control (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Greene & Hill, 2005; Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016).

I do feel I've got some control over the project because I do like the idea that children get listened to and their views get taken into consideration and they can say what they want to say. They can basically just tell people what they want to tell people and give their own views on what they feel like. And I like that idea and I feel like you've been asking us a lot of questions about what we like and what we would do, what happens to us. And I really like that about these little Zoom meetings that we've gotten. (Grace)

> *I think we had enough control and there was no need for more. It was a good amount*. (Shanza)

Notably, this discussion occurred after receiving reviewers' feedback and the child authors had even more time to reflect on both the initial project and the writing process. Though there have been some concerns over children's competency to consent and the constraints this puts upon children's agency in participatory research (Heath et al., 2007; Kirby, 2020), assent 'accepts the child's state of being' (Cocks, 2006, p. 258). The tension between children's experience of agency and adult anxieties is discussed further in the following section.

Understanding how the child authors conceptualised the adults' work was therefore important in helping us understand our relationship, and, hopefully, helping us question the principles of participatory research in the context of critical dialectical pluralism. In terms of terminology and shared understanding of meaning, Montreuil et al. (2021) addressed the issue of the use of 'participatory research' as an umbrella term, which incorporates a wide variety of research projects, arguing for a need for more careful distinction between what they identified as projects with participatory methods and with a participatory research approach. Nevertheless, achieving a shared understanding of meaning takes time, especially when we conceptualised our roles as co-authors and actively invited children to reflect on the experience, as we further outline below.

In our project, the adult authors were concerned whether four meetings per panel (a number that was imposed by the deadlines linked to the project, as is often the case in research) would be enough to create a sense of trust, where children felt confident to share their views, so we explored this in subsequent meetings.

When I was talking about my views on how teachers should teach children and what lessons the teachers should teach to the children I felt like my opinion was taken on board because Sabine said 'like Grace was saying…' so I felt understood. (Grace)

> *I do feel that you were interested in what I had to say because whenever I said something, you always seemed very focused and always replied back*. (Ayden)

A core difference between the original participatory research project (i.e., the YAP sessions) and the subsequent co-authorship sessions was that the work during the YAP sessions was typically applied, asking specifically about young children's digital habits and views, something

the YAP had identified as being of interest to them. For this reason, developing the tasks and discussing them was more closely aligned with the language repertoire and role expectations the children felt familiar with. Conceptualising our roles as colleagues and talking about them as part of the co-author sessions, however, challenged us all to find new ways of sharing. Although the child authors were still very much the experts in relation to their experiences, talking about them at a more metacognitive level was evidently trickier. '*Sometimes I'm so confused in some words that I can't really focus and understand what… Because I sometimes think that adults are talking in a like, adult-ish way and, and I could not understand it, really*' (Sarah). Sarah's comment followed a considerable period of silence in our discussions, a silence the adult authors were trying to navigate consciously and sensitively. On the one hand, we very much wanted to respect the child authors' right to silence (Brear, 2020), on the other hand, we wanted to make sure that it was, in fact, a choice and not a manifestation of the children's habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), in this case, an internalisation of power relationships. In jointly reflecting upon these moments of silence for this paper, we wanted to probe both adult and child sensitivities, helping with theorising the place of silence within participatory research.

While we were cognisant that silence can be an expression of agency and resistance, these silences were out of the ordinary as until that point, the child authors had freely shared their knowledge and opinions and often eagerly built on each other's comments. We were also aware that silence can serve to reinforce and reproduce existing power relations. Like Brear (2020), we were concerned that compelling the child authors to speak would then undermine their agency and reinforce our power as adults and researchers. Therefore, not wanting these silences to be 'interpreted according to another's desire' (Hanna, 2021), we acknowledged that the topics we were covering were difficult and sensitively explored where the reluctance to speak might be coming from. Sarah's comment above followed a straightout question which asked whether the kinds of questions we were tackling now were more difficult than the original YAP discussions. The child authors explained that the exploratory nature of our conversations was experienced as somewhat unsettling, '… *because there are loads of answers, it's opinion*' (Ayden); on the other hand, '… *some people really want to say something but they're not comfortable. When they're speaking they're a bit worried they might accidentally say something wrong, or people might say to them different things and things like that*' (Shanza). This aligns with other research which indicates that silence may be used as a means of protection from embarrassment (Hanna, 2021; Mazzei, 2008). We subsequently posted the discussion prompts on a shared document which the child authors were able to access throughout the week. Some of the child authors did write their opinions, as incorporated in this paper. Although the original YAP sessions had explored views and opinions, these were on what the children perceived as 'safer ground', views they may have tested out with others before (such as preferences for apps, online platforms, etc.), whereas the co-author sessions invited them to consider and conceptualise things they hadn't necessarily considered before (such as whether the pedagogical activities met their expectations and represented their views). Perhaps the moments of silence can be understood as partly concealment and a need for 'thinking' space (Hanna, 2021) before sharing untested opinions.

POWER DYNAMICS AND ADULT ANXIETIES

Across disciplines, consideration has been given to which 'voices' are privileged or ignored, mobilised or pathologised, including the ways that children do not choose or are for some reason unable to adhere to adult concepts of 'appropriate engagements' with the research (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Spencer et al., 2020). Historically, Hart (1992) addressed the exploitation of children by researchers merely as a tokenistic attempt to shore up their

own validity as researchers. This is an issue not solely related to participatory research with children (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Williams et al., 2020) and there have been calls for more critical engagement with the nature of participatory practice within the boundaries of 'the academy', which simultaneously valorises participatory research, whilst never genuinely challenging or even acknowledging the institutional barriers which stand in the way of achieving the ideals they espouse (Mason, 2023; Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013). This leads to a situation in which a series of projects that may be termed 'light touch', 'participatory bluffing' and pseudo-participation seek the credit for their participatory practice (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Williams et al., 2020).

Questions remain regarding the ways that adults working with children find it difficult, if not impossible, to relinquish their own power, in particular when it comes to children pushing at the hierarchical boundaries that are such a fundamental aspect of a school setting (Robinson, 2011). Throughout our study, the adult co-authors were aware that they occupied roles traditionally attached to power, especially in the context of the school YAP, a physical space where adults are generally in charge and where Hannah had experience of being a teacher, rather than a researcher (Devine, 2002). In our discussions following the research project, we returned to the concept of roles.

I think we have a different relationship because they (Hannah, Sabine and Ailin) listen to what we say and use it in the meetings so it's a bit like we're all teaching at the same time—in the same lesson. Whereas at school, it's mainly just the adults that talk and the children just take that as reference—cos children don't get to share their views as much at school—it's not as openly taken on board as when we're in our meetings together. (Grace)

The concept of all of us teaching at the same time speaks to the idea of the child as the 'expert', and the model of a partnership came through from other child authors, too.

I don't think of Hannah, Sabine and Ailin as my teachers, because you do not teach us, although you might be somebody else's teachers. I think of you being more like business partners: because you are helping to educate children, and since I am contributing to your research, I am also helping myself. (Ayden)

The co-author sessions offered an opportunity to create what Little and Little (2022) call an un/familiar space (i.e., a space that is both familiar and unfamiliar, and where traditional, perceived roles—in this case, teacher/pupil or researcher/participant—can be examined critically).

These perspectives, along with the moments of silence and the child authors' discomfort with metacognitive-level explorations, referred to above, reflect the tensions in negotiations of child–adult researcher relationships. An example of the ways that the power shifted between roles was encapsulated in the use of play. During the face-to-face panels, the researchers would play a game of Spider with the children, played similarly to Hangman, as a way of bringing the session to a close and incorporating some 'fun' into what was a discussion-heavy session. During author sessions, this game was also played via a shared online whiteboard (Google Jamboard).

I like talking with other people and listening to what they think. It seems like the project passed really quickly. However, I don't like that sometimes it seemed a bit boring. If there was anything I would change, I would like to have the meeting earlier in the day so I would have more energy to go through it. And also, we could have played more games like Spider more often. (Ayden)

Ayden's reflection here perhaps suggests that the inclusion of more 'play' in the study would have equalised the power differences between the relationship of adult authors and child authors even further (Koch, 2021). When 'play' was introduced during the co-authorship sessions, the child authors sought to take the lead in facilitating the game. '*Can we please play a quick game of Spider but, but one of us has to be it this time because Hannah's*

always being it. Are we exactly gonna do that in Spider or are we just going to let you have all the turns because it is unfair for all of us' (Sarah). For the adult authors, it was clear that the children felt happier challenging power relationships and authority in areas where they had experience of doing so, for example devising 'fair' rules for games in the playground and other peer cultural contexts (Arnott, 2018). The inclusion of games and play, coupled with discussions around our roles, thus helped to break down barriers, although we are not implying that they ever fully disappeared.

Adults' anxieties and identity crises related to 'how participatory is this research really?', while intensely valuable to maintain a critical focus upon reflexivity and to guide a sense of professional curiosity, can also distort the focus and attention from the child back around to the adult, again framing the adult as the knower, the source of power and object of enquiry, and the child the perpetually unknowing (and unknowable) subject. Whilst these problematisations are of value for any researcher who is dedicated to ethical and reflexive practice, there is another perspective. Most importantly, power in adult–child dynamics, as much as any other relationship, exists in a manner that is socially and discursively formed by children as well as adults (Gallagher, 2008a; Holland et al., 2010). The complex networks in which power is exercised are reflected in the way children understand their own power to facilitate or subvert learning, just as much as (if not more than) the way adults understand it (Holland et al., 2010; Lundy, 2018). It also ignores the ways in which power is exercised between children themselves. Some of these power dynamics between children are hidden from or misunderstood by adults working with them and so are not accounted for during the project, or taken into account when adults come to reflect back.

I feel like I felt more confidence or something like that in the school when we were face-to-face because I was around with people that I knew including you […]. *I felt more confident because people were around me that I knew and people who were friends with me, they would help me if I was stuck. But online would be a bit weird because there's not many people that I know, none of my own friends are around me*. (Sarah)

Sarah's reflection was somewhat surprising as she had been more vocal during the online co-author sessions. Further, the anxiety over being 'stuck' also hints at the maintenance of certain power dynamics associated with child–adult relationships in school and the need to respond in an expected manner. When interacting in any given situation, children will quickly identify whether it feels comfortable (i.e., confirms their existing ways of understanding the world and ideas within it), and then they identify the ways they differ from other children around them in this regard (Salmon, 2003). This drives their understanding of the power dynamics currently at play and how they will work within these; disruption, silence and unnoticeability (Kirby, 2020) may be complex expressions of agency.

Lundy (2018) argued that there is a risk of adult researchers feeling themselves unable to achieve participation and 'empowerment' to the extent that they would, being afraid of 'tokenism' (as understood by Hart, 1992) and deciding not to do this type of research with children at all. This means that 'the right to be heard is being outweighed in a conflict with another more pressing right' (p. 344). An artificial distinction between 'ideal' or 'true' participatory research, and if not that then nothing, as pointed out by Gallagher (2008a), 'obscure(s) the complex multivalency of power', instead framing it as a commodity which can be redistributed at will. Adult researchers, when approaching research in this context, find that the ways children actually implement their power in research is not the way that they expected or intended, and rather than accepting that as a perfectly legitimate and valuable insight, what can look like either chaos or flat-out refusal to participate becomes a source of frustration, anxiety and concern (Gallagher, 2008a; Sixtensson, 2022). In simple terms, children are asked a question, but if their answer isn't the one that was expected, or if it was not given in the way that adults are able or want to hear, then they do not know how to interpret

it (Spencer et al., 2020). This was clear to the adult researchers in the instances of silence in the author sessions—this silence felt uncomfortable to us, but it nevertheless represented the ways in which children utilise their own power to contribute, or not.

Acknowledging this complexity, our experience of working with a group of children to develop curriculum design highlighted a series of questions related to understanding between adults and children. How do we (as adult researchers) know if the children we are working with *really* see themselves as participants/partners in research, or as merely completing another school task set by their teacher (Robinson, 2011)? How can children *genuinely* have a meaningful impact when considering the realities of power dynamics inherent in relationships? (Devine, 2002; Robinson, 2011)? How do we allow space for young people to resist participation in research in different ways, when they may not feel that it is even possible to say no (Sixtensson, 2022)? Whilst asking these questions, it is necessary to keep in mind the interplay between knowledge and power, adult–child interactions, the meaning children can find in those interactions and the barriers children face in achieving participation, in particular related to Billington's (2006) key questions, namely: How do we speak of, write about, speak with or listen to children (and ourselves as practitioners and researchers)? We hope that this paper can respond to a call for studies which specifically look at 'children's perspectives and experiences of being engaged in participatory research' (Montreuil et al., 2021, p. 12).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although all the child authors had been vocal and expressive throughout the YAP sessions, in the writing sessions it became more apparent that co-authoring was much more familiar to the adults than it was to the children, and we needed to explore the silences in our discussions to understand our respective voices in this context.

Some questions are trickier to answer because it's like hard to get your head around. People might not remember the question or think how to think about it and go through it properly? (Shanza)

> *It is a bit tricky to understand what you're saying because for example, you're talking about something, then all of a sudden it gets really hard and hard to focus and understand what you're trying to say. And then, when somebody's trying to ask, say something, they're like, can you say the question again? And then you have to explain over and over and they're still confused. So, I'm really thinking that, it's just like confusing to understand*.
>
> (Sarah)

It is important to note that this is not simply a case of children not 'understanding' or having misconceptions, but more to do with adults and children coming to a shared space with different ways of understanding that space, different ways of communicating and different goals. In such instances, the response should not be to render participatory research a futile endeavour, rather, as Graham et al. (2018) suggest, these tensions may be approached with a view to scaffolding the development of young people's participatory skills rather than as proof of adult anxieties on children's capacity. Our project thus conceptualises silence—and the explicit exploration of silence—as a useful component of participatory research, specifically within the critical dialectical pluralism paradigm (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013). While acknowledging silence in and of itself as a potential space for power imbalances, the collaborative exploration of silence assists with developing an understanding of our different positions and reaching that shared, 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994). Within our research context and, we argue, in other research contexts, 'silence as voice' forms an important component, and we explicitly addressed

notions of power and children's voices in our discussions. As noted by Spencer et al. (2020), some children's voices are marginalised or pathologised by researchers when they either do not say the things adults want them to say, or do not say them in the 'correct' way.

I think it's important for children to have a say, because their voice should be heard even if they're a bit worried because people… They might have great ideas, but the child themselves might think they're wrong and I believe nothing is wrong. Saying something, to have a choice. (Shanza)

Once we began to discuss the notion of power, the need to be heard moved beyond the project itself, and led to more wide-ranging discussions about control.

I think it's important for children to have their voices heard, because a child's opinion might be just as important as an adult's. Like an adult, might say, 'we need more money in this country', then a child's like 'we've already got enough money, but people don't share the money properly'. Children's minds are just as good as adults' and they can help with the world as well. (Grace)

Importantly, while the adult authors were predominantly focused on notions of power and agency within our group, the child authors extended this, referring to the power and agency of themselves beyond the project.

To be honest, I did not really think that what I said would have a relatively big impact on the decisions. Perhaps it would make some difference eventually in the future but it will take a lot of effort from many parties, especially the authorities interested in the issue. (Ayden)

In this instance, while the adult researchers were interested in whether children felt listened to by the adults directly involved, Ayden displayed a clear understanding that even the adult researchers were subject to limitations and further restrictions, and that the activities we were jointly creating would not necessarily be universally adopted. This understanding of complex networks of power relationships (Gallagher, 2008b) helped to contextualise the direct juxtaposition of power in child–adult relationships. Ultimately, our collaboration aims to convince other people down the line that the work we have co-created will be useful to teach in schools.

Although co-authorship is imperfect, and certainly not a necessity for high-quality participatory research, the process does align with the critical dialectical pluralism paradigm and seeks to engage with the higher levels of Shier's (2019) participation matrix, making a methodological contribution to the field of participatory research. For us, the co-author sessions were a vital addition to our participatory research project, as they helped to contextualise our understanding of what had taken place, and how the research was experienced by all involved—adults and children alike. We feel that the inclusion of the sessions forced us to engage with complex questions around power and agency in participatory research with children. We further argue that such an extension of participatory research projects, which allows for mutual reflection on process, can be a powerful component in the future of participatory research theory and practice, if we want to holistically engage with children's agency, power and voice. For the child authors:

I like the fact that children were included in the project and I liked talking to and listening to other children too. (Grace)

> *Also, I feel that the co-author sessions were nice because it felt like somebody was listening to us, and I feel good thinking that I could contribute to a good cause. I also feel like I developed some sort of bonding or friendship with the other co-authors*. (Ayden)

Apart from the knowledge and theory produced through this shared meaning-making of our work together (Fielding, 2004), the child authors have also responded to the completion of our paper.

I feel really important doing this and I really want to be an author when I grow up and write books and things. And so, I feel like this is a really big thing. I just suddenly felt bigger and I feel like I hadn't realised it before, but I felt small. But then I felt bigger seeing my words written down on paper and it's that half excited feeling you get. (Grace)

> *I really enjoyed reading the article with my parents. It was really fun to see my answers and my knowledge. I liked how every single thing was written down*. (Shanza)

> *I was in my head like, no, I don't want my writing and stuff to be published because I'm scared people were gonna make fun of it or something because I don't write that good. But then I was like, I have nothing to worry about because it's only university people who can read it and I know they could be very proud of young kids who are working on this project. I was just really excited and stuff and I can't wait for the article to be published*. (Sarah)

This collaborative exploration of participatory research experiences offers the opportunity for 'third spaces' (Bhabha, 1994; Little & Little, 2022) for critical dialectical pluralism, with the potential to do justice to the entanglements of participatory research with children. These spaces are likely liminal, definitely complex and potentially uncomfortable, and they are spaces where silences matter as much as words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author team would like to gratefully acknowledge the funding from Holistic Think Tank for the original research linked to this project, and the help of Dr Ryan Bramley in supporting the school panel meetings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author team confirms that there are no conflicts of interest in relation to this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study received ethics approval from the University of Sheffield (School of Education).

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How to cite this article: Little, S., Raine, H., Choo, A., Joshi, R., Qarni, S. J., Sukri, A., Horton, G. & Pakravesh, S. (2024). 'The power to SAY what I want to and it gets written down': Situating children's and adults' voices and silence in participatory research. *British Educational Research Journal*, *00*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3966