



## **Educational Disadvantage Centre Briefing Paper:**

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**A critical evaluation of the extent to which participatory methods enable children to exercise agency in the research process.**

### **Introduction**

The growth of child<sup>1</sup>-focused participatory research methods (PR) is frequently linked to two broader developments – the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations (United Nations, 1989) and the emergence of the ‘new’ sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002).

Article 12 of the UNCRC enshrined children’s rights to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Lundy, 2007). Although not explicitly mentioning research, the UNCRC lent ‘political and quasi-legal’ support for research approaches that sought to foster children’s participation (Holland, Renold, Ross & Hillman, 2010, p. 361). Around the same time, the new sociology of childhood was beginning to challenge children’s marginalized position within mainstream sociology system (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Deterministic models of socialization theory had previously dominated understandings of children and childhood. Children had been conceptualised as largely passive recipients of adult culture, which was transmitted and internalized by children within the institutions of the family and the education. By contrast, the new sociology of childhood re-positioned children as active social actors capable of making sense of their social world and of providing insightful contributions about their own and others’ lives (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002). This new paradigm signalled a shift from viewing children as vulnerable, dependent beings

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term children will be used to refer to individuals aged 0-18, as defined by the UNCRC.

occupying a transitional social status on the way to adulthood, to one which emphasized their competency and agency in their current lives (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Qvortrup, 1994). This also led to a reconceptualization of their role within research, from passive object to active participant and co-researcher, with children acting as primary researchers in some participatory models (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Kellett, 2004).

### **Participatory Research**

Whilst encompassing a variety of meanings; a core principle underpinning PR is the recognition of children as experts in their own lives and the commitment to providing space for their diverse voices to be heard and taken seriously (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Grover, 2004). PR endorses a collaborative approach supporting the active involvement of children as equal partners in each stage of the research (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006). The aim is for children to be actively involved in the production of data using a range of engaging and practical techniques (Gallagher, 2008). The central role of power relationships within the research process is acknowledged and the explicit goal of PR is to empower participants and bring about positive change in their lives here and now (Cahill, 2004). One consequence of this focus is that the boundaries between research and intervention may be less distinct in PR (Franks, 2011). Proponents of the approach highlight that children's views are 'fluid and performative, not fixed and essential' (Warming, 2011, p. 40), therefore in attempting to represent the complexity of children's views, there is a commitment to building research relationships over time and revisiting topics (Horgan, 2017). It is argued that PR offers a more ethical approach to research due to its commitment to fostering children's agency and to capturing children's voices.

### **Agency**

An understanding of the term agency is central to the focus of the current paper. However, despite its widespread use within sociological discourse, agency remains an 'abstract, vaguely defined and ill-theorised concept' (Sirrko, Kyrönlampi & Puroila, 2019, p. 285). Agency is frequently referred to as a mechanism in children's participation and decision making, yet the precise meaning of the term is rarely clarified (Prout, 2005, cited in Plows, 2012).

The structure-agency debate has long occupied a central position within sociological discourse; in which social structures have been traditionally viewed as constraining individual agency (Abebe, 2019). Giddens' structuration theory (1984) represented an

attempt to move beyond such dualistic thinking and was embraced by many within childhood sociology. In Giddens' framework, social forces do not determine individual action, rather individuals have the capacity to actively construct and reconstruct their experiences of the social world, 'in ways that accept, resist, challenge and transform existing social structures' (Leonard, 2016, p. 64).

Against this theoretical backdrop, some broad definitions of agency have been proposed such as the ability to 'act purposively' (Valentine, 2011, p. 349) and 'the initiation of action by choice' (James et al., 1998, p. 207). By contrast, Giddens adopted more demanding criteria, arguing that agency 'must cause or contribute to social change or resistance to such change' (Giddens, 1984, p. 11). Interestingly, this definition does not present resistance as a *necessary* feature of agency; compliance, negotiation and compromise are taken to be equally valid expressions of agency (Leonard, 2016; Punch, 2001 cited in Plows, 2012). Yet, by setting such a high threshold, arguably agency is placed beyond the reach of most children given their unequal, generational position in society (Valentine, 2011).

The conceptualisation of agency that informs this paper focuses on 'the capacity to choose, act and influence, with belief in this capacity developing a sense of agency' (Mentha, Church & Page, 2015, p. 626). This definition incorporates the importance of making something happen in relation to other people, central to Mayall's (2003) conception of agency whilst also implying that the individual acts 'knowingly and deliberately' to achieve their aims (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 502). However, certain reservations should be borne in mind when employing any definition of agency, some of which will briefly be outlined below.

Agency is frequently presented in a romanticised light as either inherently 'good' or constructive (Holloway, Holt & Mills, 2019). However, in practice child agency does not always neatly align with liberal ideals of rationality and may be expressed in ways that are defined as self-defeating or challenging by adults (Bordonaro, 2012; Plows, 2012). There has also been a tendency in some PR to discuss power and agency as if they were properties located within the individual, capable of being straightforwardly transferred from adult to child during the research process (Gallagher, 2008; Grover, 2004 cited in Holland et al., 2010). Critics have argued that children's agency is more accurately conceptualised as relational and dynamic, emerging within context-specific, social interactions negotiated by both children and adults (Lee, 2001; Punch et al., 2007 cited in Plows, 2012). Therefore, any

discussion of children's agency needs to acknowledge the wider social, economic, political and generational structures in which children's relationships are located (Leonard, 2016; Punch, 2016). It is clearly too simplistic to understand children's agency as the straightforward 'exercise of authentic choice or self-directed action' (Valentine, 2011, p. 348).

Following a brief consideration of the two central terms underpinning this paper, the following sections offer a critical evaluation of the extent to which PR enables children to exercise agency. Two themes will structure this discussion: children's representation within PR and power relationships (Horgan, 2017). These two themes, and the links between them, will be explored from a variety of angles, reflecting the core concerns of the six articles on which this paper is based.

### **Children's Representation**

Children's ability to exercise agency within PR may be evaluated in terms of the level of participation permitted in the research process and the extent to which children's perspectives are fairly represented as a result of that participation.

PR is committed to move beyond the conventional view of children as simply 'providers of data', to enable children to become owners of research (Holland et al., 2010, p. 372). As such, they endorse access to the highest levels of child-directed participation within research, reflected in models such as Hart's Ladder (Hart, 1992 cited in Stoecklin, 2012). However, in practice the level of participation that PR affords children varies widely. It has been observed that children are frequently excluded from key stages including research design, analysis, dissemination and evaluation (Percy-Smith, 2010). This can reduce children's sense of ownership of the research and has implications for their ability to exercise agency (Franks, 2011; Stoecklin, 2012).

One reason for this limited participation is due to requirements imposed by external funders; a significant but often overlooked source of adult power in the research process which can constrain researchers' options (Franks, 2011; Percy-Smith, 2010). Horgan acknowledges that it was impossible to engage children as equal participants in all stages of her research due to the pre-specified research aims and narrow time-frame imposed by funders (2017).

Similarly, the common funding requirement that researchers provide advance details of their research questions, analysis and plans for dissemination reduces opportunities for children to

participate in key research decisions and limits their sense of ownership (Franks, 2011). More challenging still, compared to conventional research, PR is time consuming, less predictable and therefore perceived as more risky by funders, making it less likely to attract competitive research funding (Franks, 2011; Healy, 2001). Funders may also not understand the need for child participants to receive training before they can participate in each stage of the research (Franks, 2011).

Developmental explanations have also been advanced to account for children's limited participation. Developmental constraints on involving children can arise at all stages of the research, but are particularly evident in those areas requiring more advanced research skills such as data analysis and report writing (Holland et al., 2010). Similarly, developmental constraints may affect children's cognitive and emotional readiness to engage with certain topics, particularly those of a more personal or sensitive nature (Holland et al., 2010). Researchers should therefore be more cautious about over-extending the so-called 'competent child discourse' and instead recognize that agency may be constrained by a combination of social and individual developmental factors (Stoecklin, 2012, p. 447).

From an ethical standpoint, participating in aspects of research such as data analysis and dissemination may not be possible if it involves access to other participants' data, due to issues of confidentiality - although this reservation does not apply exclusively to children (Holland et al., 2010). Similarly, issues of confidentiality may arise when children are interviewed by their peers. This can lead to more guarded responses and therefore raises questions about the value of children's participation in these aspects of research (Padgett, 2008 cited in Franks, 2011).

Given the lack of empirical evidence either way, concerns remain about whether participation in all stages of the research is actually desired by children (Hill, 2006 cited in Holland et al., 2010). Indeed, this gap in understanding leaves open the possibility that PR 'may be imposing a particular relationship on those who we seek data from' (Birch & Millar, 2002, p. 100 cited in Holland et al., 2010). For example, it is evident in some PR that certain stages of the research process do not hold sufficient interest to secure children's sustained engagement (Holland et al., 2010). This echoes a broader dilemma within childhood sociology - the need to adequately consider those children who have no desire to participate and do not want to be agents (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

In response to the challenges of enabling full participation and as a way of providing children with greater choice, an alternative approach offering ‘pockets of participation’ has been proposed in which children develop ownership over discrete sections of the research process once it has begun (Franks, 2011, p.15). In Franks’ study, children chose to be involved in certain aspects of the research process only – contributing to the design of questionnaires and interview schedules. As a result of their participation, they felt that their voices had been heard and that they had made a positive difference to the sensitivity of certain questions. Thus, a stakeholder role in jointly negotiated elements of the research may represent a more realistic goal than total ownership of all stages and may actually offer children greater opportunities to exercise agency (Franks, 2011).

By contrast, Holland et al. (2010) report an example of PR which attempted to include children as equal participants in all stages of the research process which offers some relevant insights concerning the scope for children’s agency. At the outset, the research aims were kept intentionally broad to allow the participants to exercise choice over the particular issues they wanted to explore. Similarly, participants were able to choose the types of methods and media they wished to engage with in order to represent their views as well as how they would use these. The children retained control over which research interactions they wished to be recorded and individually made choices about which aspects of their personal data could and could not be used for analysis. In general, the researchers reported that it was more productive to follow the children’s preferences for ‘more immediate or informal involvement’ rather than insisting on adult ways of ‘doing research’, although the trade-off was reduced transparency regarding children’s participation in the research process (Holland et al., 2010, p. 369). Whilst not without challenges, this example provides evidence that PR can support children to make meaningful choices about their participation within each stage of the research process.

A further challenge to children’s accurate representation within PR concerns the extent to which the child’s ‘voice’ remains distinct from interpretations imposed by the researcher (Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). Arguably this reflects a dilemma common to all research that ‘the researcher is both written into and writes the story’ (Walkerdine et al., 2002, p. 181 cited in Holland et al., 2010). However, it is particularly salient for PR which specifically claims to privilege children’s views and foster their agency. This challenge reaffirms the importance of children’s involvement in all research stages as well as the need for researcher reflexivity, since PR could act to undermine children’s agency if it misrepresents children’s

views under the banner of ‘authentic voice’ (Eldén, 2012; Spyrou, 2011). The next section will explore the value of using particular methods to enable children to exercise agency within PR.

The ability of traditional large scale research methods to engage children and capture their authentic viewpoints has been widely questioned (James et al., 1998; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). In response, a range of participatory research methods have been developed aimed at giving children the opportunity to express their views more freely and to participate more actively in the research process by drawing on their current skills (Hunleth, 2011; O’Kane, 2008). These include children and young people’s advisory groups (CYAGs) (Horgan, 2017), capacity building activities (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011), peer led interviewing, focus groups and a range of visual and creative methods (Clark & Moss, 2011; Holland et al., 2010; Stoecklin, 2012). When used in combination, these provide opportunities for children to participate using ‘multiple modalities of expression’ (Quiroz et al., 2014, p. 212 cited in Horgan, 2017).

Incorporating capacity building within the research design represents an attempt to foster deeper participation in the research process by increasing children’s understanding of research skills and/or their familiarity with the issues being researched (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). This approach has the potential to increase opportunities for children to exercise agency within PR as structured support is provided to help children to develop their own opinions. However, if poorly constructed it could lead to the imposition of adult perspectives, since it is typically the researcher who identifies the substantive areas around which to build capacity. The use of CYAGs reflects the commitment to optimize children’s participation in the research process and to acknowledge children’s expertise (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). Children with similar characteristics to the participants are invited to make suggestions about the proposed research approach in order to improve the overall design. For example, the CYAG’s involvement in piloting data collection tools has been shown to contribute to more sensitively designed instructions and questions as well as the identification of relevant themes for investigation and analysis (Barker & Weller, 2003; Horgan, 2017; Plows, 2012). Arguably, such input supports the deeper participation of all children in the research process and may operate as a counterbalance to the tendency for adult interpretations and perspectives to dominate, thereby improving representation of children’s views and fostering children’s agency (Horgan, 2017).

Visual and activity focused methods have a number of reported advantages when used with children (Holland et al., 2010; Stoecklin, 2012). They allow children to understand, reflect on and express abstract and complex knowledge in a concrete and more enjoyable way, thus promoting deeper participation and enabling those at an earlier developmental stage to express their views (Horgan, 2017; Punch, 2002). These methods also tend to be more informal and less adult-controlled, therefore facilitating more open-ended and sustained responses directed by children themselves, as described in Horgan's research and elsewhere (e.g. Barker & Weller, 2003; Eldén, 2012; O'Kane, 2008). However, critics have argued that by utilizing approaches regularly employed by teachers, for example role-play and brainstorming, PR may in effect be 'taking advantage of children's schooled docility towards such activities' thereby undermining claims regarding children's agency in the research process (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 506). Also, it is possible that some children may find it more empowering to engage with methods typically used in adult research, such as questionnaires, since they signal to the child that their competence and views are being taken seriously (Punch, 2002).

Whilst 'person-friendly' methods are widely supported in PR (Punch, 2002), critics have highlighted that participation depends far more on the social relations involved in the research than on the precise techniques or participatory mechanisms employed (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; O'Kane, 2008). What matters is 'how participation is enacted' at each stage from initiation through to dissemination (Holland et al., 2010, p. 373). The following section will explore this issue, critically evaluating the nature of the relationships within PR and their implications for children's ability to exercise agency.

### **Power Relationships**

Efforts to foster children's agency in PR may be threatened at the very outset by the paternalistic stance of institutional ethics review boards towards child participants, potentially reinforcing adult-child power relationships (Horgan, 2017). A tension exists between PR's commitment to respect children as knowledgeable social actors and ethical procedures that prevent children from providing informed consent on their own behalf (Horgan, 2017). The implicit assumption that children cannot understand what they are consenting to contradicts the basic premise of PR which recognizes children's competence (Coyne, 2010). This power inequality is particularly evident when children can access services without parental consent,



but require parental consent to participate in research evaluating those services (Balen et al., 2006).

A similar paternalism can be discerned in the informal power exercised by gatekeepers (Horgan, 2017). In schools, researchers' efforts to attract a diverse range of participants to the study can be confounded by staff who hand-pick those they view as 'most suitable'. This was apparent in Horgan's study where 'children asked to volunteer [by teachers] were those deemed to be articulate and 'good' representatives' (2017, p. 248). This imbalance of power between adult gatekeepers and children can deny some children the opportunity to make their own decisions about participation in research and lead to the exclusion of certain groups (Percy-Smith, 2010; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Clearly, when evaluating the capacity of PR to foster children's agency knowing 'who is *not* involved in the research is just as important as who is', although non-reporting means that this information often remains largely hidden (Franks, 2011, p. 20).

The nature of the research space can significantly influence if and how children participate in PR (Percy-Smith, 2010). Much PR is carried out in schools due to easy access to large groups of children, yet children's ability to exercise agency may be constrained by the unequal power relationships that dominate such spaces (Horgan, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2010). This may impact on children's ability to freely consent to and withdraw from research. When research is introduced within a school context, children may not realise that they have a genuine choice regarding their participation (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001; Dockett et al., 2013). There may be subtle pressure to acquiesce to adult requests and act in order to gain adult approval, since this is expected behavior in schools (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Wyness, 2006). Similarly, it may be more challenging in a school context for children to withdraw from research once it has begun since feelings of obligation and pressure to uphold the school's reputation may take precedence (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Heath, Charles, Crow & Wiles, 2007).

Once the research has begun, children's willingness and/or ability to participate continues to be directly affected by the choice of research space. Horgan reports how one teacher's uninvited attendance at the initial meeting between researchers and children had a pronounced effect on the nature of the interaction, limiting the discussion between children and researchers. Merely by being an adult in the school context – a setting where both space and time is structured and dominated by adults - may lead to researchers 'being positioned in

the teacher's role' (Horgan, 2017, p. 249). Children's expectations of adults' roles in the school may therefore represent a significant barrier to them working together equally as co-researchers (Johansson, 2012). This may have implications for the views that children share and more broadly for children's ability to exercise agency in the research process. For instance, the desire to provide the 'right' answer, a practice that is actively reinforced in most school contexts, can limit children's ability to exercise agency in school-based research (Holland et al., 2010; Spyrou, 2011). However, it should be acknowledged that schools differ quite widely in relation to the nature of adult-child relations and their democratic structures; children in some schools may be relatively used to having their views sought and acted on by adults whereas this may be an entirely unfamiliar experience in other settings (Mayall, 1994 cited in Plows, 2012).

Some have argued that PR carried out in less adult dominated settings may offer children greater opportunities to express their views freely and to exercise greater agency (Percy-Smith, 2010). However, Holland et al. (2010) suggest that issues of adult power are not entirely circumvented in more informal research settings. In these circumstances children may still feel obliged to supply data, perhaps out of a desire to please the researcher or to maintain access to the positive outcomes that flow from being involved in the research. However, the authors also cite a number of examples within the same research where children set clear limits on their own participation and expressed unequivocal choices about the inclusion and exclusion of personal data (Holland et al., 2010). In attempting to support children's agency in PR, researchers must be continually alert to the subtle ways in which structurally unequal power relationships can act to constrain children's choices (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002 cited in Holland et al., 2010).

It is recognized that the participatory process does not facilitate all children's voices equally; for some children PR can be experienced as disempowering, particularly those with disabilities and younger children (Warming, 2011 cited in Horgan, 2017). The influence of peer cultures and classroom dynamics can spill over into the research process and undermine efforts to achieve equal participation. This can result in some voices being systematically privileged over others and may be particularly evident in group interviews (Holland et al., 2010). Group approaches may offer some children the benefit of peer support, thus diluting the power imbalance between children and adults present in individual interviews (Hill, 2006; Punch, 2002). However, a by-product of this is that group interviews may lead to the production of 'consensus narratives' in which discrepant views are marginalized or silenced

(Yuen, 2004 cited in Horgan, 2017). Holland et al. were struck by the power imbalances between children in their research and the various ways in which some voices were silenced due to the influence of 'physical, cultural and intellectual capital (e.g. age, gender), through the domination of space (e.g. movement and territorial occupation of places within the centre) or sound (e.g. talking over)' (2010, p. 367). Techniques may be employed to counteract such challenges – for example, Horgan recommends use of proxy questions and careful management of group interaction. However, this issue highlights the need to attend to silences and non-verbal communication as equally significant expressions of agency in research with children (Spyrou, 2011 cited in Horgan, 2017; Plows, 2012). In addition, children may benefit from the choice between an individual or group interview (Punch, 2002).

Similarly, involving children as interviewers may not enable all children's agency in a straightforward way. More recent understandings of the interview process suggest that power is not always located within the interviewer and can shift as the interview unfolds, sometimes positioning the child interviewer in a less powerful role (Franks, 2011). By contrast, some have argued that child interviewers may come to be perceived as proxy adults by their peers, thus power differentials may continue to characterize this encounter (France, 1999; 2000 cited in Franks, 2011). On the other hand, children may be more likely to alter their responses to maintain social status when interviewed by peers compared to adults (Franks, 2011). Consequently, it has been suggested that children's agency might be served better by having an adult interviewer ask the questions identified in advance as relevant by children (Padgett, 2008 cited in Franks, 2011).

Whilst PR is frequently labelled empowering and therefore supportive of children's agency, critics have pointed out that much of it still remains under the close direction of adult researchers (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Healy, 2001). What counts as participation may be heavily influenced by adults, for example children being directed as to the type and location of photos that should be taken in the use of participatory photo-voice methods (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). There have been efforts to attenuate adult power within PR, engaging with children on more equal terms by adopting the role of a familiar adult (Mayall, 2008) or a 'least adult role' (Mandell, 1991). In the latter model researchers attempt to 'participate in the children's everyday lives in as childlike a way as possible: playing with the children, submitting to the authority of their adult carers, abdicating from adult authority and privileges' (Warming, 2011, p. 42 cited in Horgan, 2017). There are serious questions about

whether it is possible for adults to inhabit such roles as well as doubts about how convincing children find this modified role in practice (Atkinson, 2019). Furthermore, where children are given little direction from the researcher, ethical issues may arise concerning the use of limited resources such as time (researcher's and participants') and money, particularly where little usable data is generated (Holland et al., 2010). Further ethical dilemmas concerning when or how to intervene to manage children's behavior may also result (Atkinson, 2019; Plows, 2012).

PR is often justified on the grounds that it avoids the exploitation of participants due to their role as equal partners in the research process (Franks, 2011; Morrow & Richards, 1996). However, exploitation has been identified in the PR practice of adults using children to access their peer group. Rather than fostering their agency, involving children in research from which they stand to gain very little may be exploitative. This is particularly salient in research with marginalized groups such as refugees, where children's experiences may represent the only cultural capital that they possess (Chataway, 1997 cited in Franks, 2011). One response to this dilemma is to ensure that children gain some demonstrable benefit from their participation such as exposure to enjoyable, new experiences, acquisition of new skills and increased confidence (Franks, 2011). Evidence suggests that such individual benefits can flow from children's involvement in PR and consequently may enable children to exercise greater agency both in the current research and in their wider lives (Percy-Smith, 2010).

The above discussion clearly indicates the complex role that adults play in PR with children, an area that has only recently begun to be examined in any detail (Wyness, 2008 cited in Franks, 2011). Yet, even if it is accepted that PR continues to be largely managed by adults, children should not be viewed as entirely powerless in these situations (Franks, 2011; Hill, 2006; Morrow, 2008). Children can express their agency by choosing to remain silent in focus groups, refusing to cooperate in activities, leaving questions unanswered, 'spoiling' questionnaires or denying access to their peers (Christensen, 2004; Danby & Farrell, 2005; Franks, 2011). Such examples refocus attention on the 'relational dimensions of expression of agency' illustrating the interdependence of child and adult agency within the research process (Plows, 2012, p. 279). These examples of children's agency also challenge fixed, binary conceptions of power 'where the researcher always embodies 'power' and the research participant always already embodies 'powerlessness' (Holland et al., 2010, p. 363). The reality is more complex than this; both power and ability to exercise agency can shift as the research encounter unfolds (Atkinson, 2019; Gallagher, 2008; Plows, 2012). Dichotomies

such as adult-child may have some useful explanatory value and indeed are necessary in order for the social construction of childhood to make theoretical sense (Ryan, 2008). However, critics point out the fluid and performative nature of both adult and child identities, and the need to ‘explore the ways boundaries between such dichotomies are blurred in everyday practices’ (Plows, 2012, p. 282).

In considering children’s ability to exercise agency within PR, some contend that there has been an over-focus on the participatory process and insufficient attention paid to research impact (Holland et al., 2010; Percy-Smith, 2010). Despite the claims of some writers (e.g. Cahill, 2004; Grover, 2004), there is scant evidence to support the view that PR produces better data or leads to real change in children’s lives (Holland et al., 2010; Percy-Smith, 2010). According to some critics, this is partly because children’s participation has been narrowly operationalized, understood in terms of consultation and the opportunity to ‘have a say’ (Percy-Smith, 2010). Rather than challenging power differences between adults and children, participation often takes place on adult terms, typically driven by organizational agendas seeking to justify service decisions (Percy-Smith, 2010). Such a circumscribed consultation model may offer the appearance of empowerment but in reality significantly limits children’s ability to exercise agency and fails to tackle ongoing issues of social exclusion experienced by children. Children’s continuing lack of real influence, for example, in relation to decision making and commissioning of services has been documented (Percy-Smith, 2010; Stoecklin, 2012). There has also been an over-focus on participation through formal structures such as school councils and youth parliament, however it is argued that these fora remain distant and separate from the reality of children’s day-to-day lives (Percy-Smith, 2010). For example, children may be encouraged to voice their opinions within the context of the school council but this democratic approach is not reflected back in the classroom where powerlessness and a lack of choice may continue to characterize children’s experiences. The same criticism could be applied to PR carried out in schools and youth settings. Arguably, this narrow conceptualization of participation fails to promote children’s ‘own sense of agency, to become critical thinkers, to resolve problems and make changes’, instead continuing to foster dependence on expert adults (Percy-Smith, 2010, p.112).

A similar objection is raised by critics who question one of PR’s central assumptions - that children need adults to empower them (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). This implies a level of dependency on adults in order for children to exercise their agency and leaves PR in danger of ‘perpetuating the very model that they purport to oppose’ (p. 503). Arguably, much social

research involving children is driven by adult notions of this group as ‘either dangerous or in danger’; by requiring children to participate in the process of knowledge production about themselves, PR may ‘involve children in processes that aim to regulate them’ (p. 499). Thus whilst providing some, limited opportunities for children to experience greater agency during the research, the price to pay may be greater scrutiny and control over children’s lives (Plows, 2012). This links to calls for PR to move beyond simply researching ‘children’s issues’, to focus on areas of wider mainstream concern, thereby extending the scope for children to exercise agency (Uprichard, 2010 cited in Horgan, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has critically examined the extent to which participatory research methods enable children to exercise agency in the research process, with reference to six articles and the themes of representation and power relationships. Whilst PR voices strong commitment to empowering children and has led to the development of a range of techniques to foster children’s participation, it is apparent that it does not yet represent ‘a methodology that is unequivocally participatory and non-hierarchical’ and consequently cannot offer a straightforward solution to enabling children’s agency in the research process. Indeed, some have questioned the distinctiveness of PR, pointing out its links to long-established ethnographic approaches, which in turn has cast doubt on whether PR is ‘necessarily more enabling for participants, is ethically or morally superior to other types of research or produces ‘better’ research (Holland et al., 2010, p. 360). To address this, there have been calls for much greater transparency about the participative process adopted by researchers in order to clarify how empowering the approach was or was not for children (Franks; 2011; Holland et al., 2010). Without such transparency, complex issues relating to the challenges of authentic representation and power relationships within the PR process will remain unresolved.

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