

Educating the Young Child 17

Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice

Angela Eckhoff *Editor*

Participatory Research with Young Children

 Springer

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Advances in Theory and Research, Implications
for Practice

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Participatory Research with Young Children

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Preface

Over the past few decades, a methodological revolution has been changing the face of qualitative research within fields devoted to childhood studies and education. Scholars across various fields within the social sciences are appropriating theoretical frameworks and qualitative methodologies that serve to support children's involvement in research as valued collaborators. My own introduction to these ideas came from William Corsaro's seminal works exploring children's friendships and peer culture in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. As a doctoral student training in ethnographic methods, I found Corsaro's emphasis on the necessity of interpreting children's behaviors from their own perspectives (1985) both commonsense and seemingly impossible. While I had read many ethnographies that emphasized adult perspectives, Corsaro's works were the first that I'd encountered where young children were presented as capable of such engagement. My experiences of teaching and working with young children for many years informed an intuitive reaction that such participation was certainly possible if children were provided sustained and personally meaningful opportunities for collaboration. From my own experiences, I knew that such engagement happened every day in classrooms and learning environments where adults respected, honored, and believed in children as knowledgeable beings.

However, the constraints to such practices often come from those outside the world of participatory research where children are viewed as *becomings* rather than as knowledgeable, powerful *beings*; where the language around children's abilities is focused on readiness, appropriateness, and typicalness; where research mentors expect to see adult commentary as necessary data sources to supplement children's work and words in order to satisfy long-held understandings of what constitutes valuable data in early education settings; or, where ethics review boards wonder how to protect children whose voices and faces appear in the photos or videos they themselves create during the day-to-day life of a classroom. While there is an increasing interest in creating spaces of participatory collaboration with young children in research, much of what is currently written involves older children and teenagers, providing little guidance related to children in the early childhood years. The unique issues that arise during participatory work with young children – ethical

considerations, limitations in individual agency, power inequities, and emerging communication abilities – warrant a volume dedicated to exploring participatory practices as applied in a variety of early learning settings.

The inspiration for this volume arose from numerous conversations with colleagues, students, and the children that we, as a collective, work with in an attempt to support authentic views of participatory research as it unfolds in complex early learning environments. This volume features the work of researchers collaborating with young children across a wide landscape of early learning settings but, as a point of commonality, all of us hold true to the understanding that young children are capable, knowledgeable collaborators. Our collective intention with this volume is to contribute to the existing knowledge base on participatory research by presenting detailed descriptions of our work alongside young children as we navigate learning settings that often emphasize the *becoming* view of children rather than the *knowledgeable being* view. As a primary aim, this volume serves to demonstrate the ways in which we, as early childhood scholars and qualitative researchers, problematize, adapt, and overcome the challenges that are inherent to participatory work with young children.

Participatory research with young children is, for a lack of a better word, complicated. Participatory researchers must be open to shared decision making and the ways in which children’s participation evolves over time. This means that participatory researchers must hold a deep level of trust in children – trust that children are capable, knowledgeable, and collaborative. The chapters within this volume hold these fundamental viewpoints of young children while also presenting honest accounts of researchers struggling with the messiness and uncertainty of participatory research when undertaken in real-world classrooms and schools. In addition to views into authentic learning environments, the chapters in this volume also draw upon on a wide range of children’s knowledge and learning experiences. The diversity of our underlying research aims and focus across a range of educational content areas also serves to share a variety of researcher voices, from emerging to established scholars, in order to broaden the methodological conversation within and invite readers to connect to the multiple ways of exploring and understanding shared within this text. In this sense, *Participatory Research with Young Children* works to place the field of participatory research within the context of contemporary early learning environments.

Structure of the Text

Participatory Research with Young Children presents a guiding framework for designing and supporting work with young children that is grounded in contemporary understandings of child development and the rights of every child. The volume shares detailed approaches to research designs that support collaborative work with young children, teachers, and families in a wide range of early learning environments. *Participatory Research with Young Children* seeks to empower and inform readers about the conceptual understandings and methodological approaches that

can be used to support participatory research investigations where the young is viewed child as knowledgeable and capable of sharing unique opinions, interpretations, and understandings of her experiences as embedded within social, cultural, and political worlds. Throughout this volume the authors set the stage for early childhood researchers and educators to develop new understandings grounded in post-developmental, post-structural, and social constructivist theories while exploring supportive methodological approaches.

Participatory Research with Young Children:

1. Introduces the conceptual foundations of participatory work with young children
2. Describes the ethical considerations that underlie all collaborative work and participatory research with young children
3. Connects participatory research approaches with young children in a variety of early learning environments to meaningful research questions and projects which view the child as capable and competent
4. Provides descriptive accounts of contemporary participatory research with children from study design through dissemination
5. Explores the obstacles and affordances that emerge during the data generation, analysis, and dissemination phases of participatory research with young children

The text is presented in four parts – *Conceptual and Ethical Considerations for Participatory Work*, *Exploring Children’s Agency Through Engagement in Participatory Research Practices*, *Participatory Research and Challenges to Accepted Practices and Understandings of Young Children*, and *Analysis and Dissemination of Participatory Work with Children*. The chapters in each part are designed to scaffold and extend understandings of participatory research through authentic, illustrative descriptions of work with young children. Each chapter also includes a listing of questions designed to engage the reader in a collaborative dialog with the chapter author(s) regarding the themes and ideas presented within.

Part I: Conceptual and Ethical Considerations for Participatory Work

This part features three chapters that explore the conceptual and ethical issues encountered during participatory research endeavors. With the increasing use of participatory approaches in work with young children and the support underscored in international legislation advocating for the rights of the child, problematizing research ethics is key responsibility of participatory researchers. Grounding participatory research in conceptual understandings of the roles that children can enact to support their own agency during research interactions is central to uncovering the process and outcomes of such work. Additionally, the chapters within this part all

position participatory work with young children within a strengths-based theoretical or conceptual framework. Eckhoff (Chap. 1, this volume) presents and applies two conceptual frameworks that are useful for understanding and situating the range of participation that can be supported when researching with young children. In addition to conceptual supports for participatory work, participatory research must take efforts to ensure that the research practices employed support children's views and perspectives, empower engagement, and ensure their right to be heard. Truscott, Graham, and Powell (Chap. 2, this volume) present a reflective account of their own ethical thinking during research design, recruitment, informed consent, field work, and the analysis and dissemination of research findings. Their account clearly situates the participatory researcher in a space outside that of a traditional developmental or post-developmental approach. The role described by Truscott et al. and later by Pase (Chap. 3, this volume) describes the tensions with researcher positioning in participatory work as it gives rise to varying possibilities for more respectful, genuine interactions between adults and children.

Part II: Exploring Children's Agency Through Engagement in Participatory Research Practices

The four chapters in this part explore the development of research practices and designs that support the direct and meaningful involvement of children within a variety of learning settings. Classrooms, schools, and child care settings for young children are dynamic, demanding, and challenging environments for research. In spite of the challenges, these spaces offer researchers opportunities to explore children's perspectives on their experiences which can, in turn, inform adult understandings and decision-making for both large-scale policy and individual practices. Central to this work is an emphasis on supporting authentic routes for children to enact choice-making over their experiences and activities. Each chapter within this part explores the considerations participatory researchers encounter as they develop the contexts and supports necessary to promote young children's agency within early learning environments. In Chap. 4 of this volume, Griffin presents her experiences as a participatory researcher working in early-grades classrooms utilizing four different participatory interviewing practices with young learners and discusses the implications of interviewing practices on children's engagement. Through work within the content area of language arts, Ness (Chap. 5, this volume) explores the relationship that can be supported between participatory research design and participatory classroom pedagogical practices. In her work, Ness connects inquiry-based classroom practices to active student engagement in the development of content knowledge and pedagogical practices. Offering additional understandings of children engaged in both curriculum and research, Husbye (Chap. 6, this volume) explores the duality of children's engagement in the creation of video data as their work ultimately created the space(s) for both inquiry and agentic positioning within

their learning environment. Another important consideration to children's agency within early learning spaces is the child's role in documentation and reflection. Kumpulainen and Ouakrim-Soivio (Chap. 7, this volume) explore various supports and challenges to children's agency when engaged in the cultivation of digital portfolios and documentation.

Part III: Participatory Research and Challenges to Accepted Practices and Understandings of Young Children

A central idea within participatory work is that participants are empowered to develop deeper understandings of their lives or enact possibilities for change within their experiences and their collaborative involvement. This part presents two chapters exploring the ways in which participatory research with young children can serve to challenge accepted practices or understandings in early childhood. Accounts of participatory research with young children with special needs are quite rare in the participatory research landscape. In Chap. 8 of this volume, Urbach and Banerjee examine the methodological, ethical, and theoretical issues inherent to engaging children from special populations in participatory work. They offer a constructive analysis of the issues surrounding children's participation and offer recommendations for equitable, authentic research practices for children from special populations. As participatory research has the potential to provide opportunities to share the authentic voice of children participating as researchers, it can serve to challenge the dominant understandings and beliefs about young children. Leafgrean (Chap. 9, this volume) details her work with counterstorytelling a key component of critical race theory (CRT), an accessible, yet powerful approach to participatory work with marginalized children of color. In this work, the children's counternarratives disrupted the dominant narrative of school experiences and offered a new space for the children's own words and stories.

Part IV: Analysis and Dissemination of Participatory Work with Children

The final part of this volume features three chapters that explore children's engagement in the latter stages of participatory research – analysis and dissemination. These stages are often the least included components of participatory research with young children. The chapters in this part explore various means of supporting the meaningful engagement of young children during the processes of analysis and dissemination while also problematizing the challenges inherent to such engagement. Eckhoff (Chap. 10, this volume) explores the possibilities for young children's engagement in the local display and public dissemination of their work. The

children's engagement in a *Photovoice* project offered new opportunities to support children during the analysis and dissemination phases of research highlighting the possibilities that can exist for young children to share their insights and experiences through their own work. Pinter (Chap. 11, this volume) shares her work with an exploratory project working together with mixed ability and linguistically diverse primary-grades children. Serving as first-time researchers, Pinter recounts the children's experiences navigating throughout all phases of research and suggests the need for further research exploring children's sustained engagement in participatory work. In Chap. 12 of this volume, McClure Sweeny shares a critical, reflective account of her work engaged in arts-based participatory research with young children in an early care setting. McClure Sweeny offers an account that captures interactive, collaborative nature of digital art-making and documentation as it occurred between children, teachers, and family members and highlights the forms of dissemination that were collaboratively developed.

Concluding Thoughts

While analytic findings drawn from the work of young children have filled volumes of early childhood research for decades, the children themselves have been largely absent from this same body of literature. It is our intention to promote deeper, authentic understandings of young children's engagement in participatory research within the complex, often restrictive, spaces of learning inhabited by young children and early educators. Through careful attention to the experiences of children in our research, we invite all concerned with early care and education to consider the practices involved in participatory research in order to support the ethical, authentic inclusion of children as key collaborators working alongside adults.

Norfolk, VA, USA

Angela Eckhoff

Reference

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Part I
Conceptual and Ethical Considerations
for Participatory Work

Chapter 1

Participation Takes Many Forms: Exploring the Frameworks Surrounding Children's Engagement in Participatory Research



Angela Eckhoff

The Roots of Participatory Work

As awareness of children's participation rights increased in the 1990s following ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), academia's attention to participatory-based methodological approaches to researching with children began to emerge and gain increasing understanding and acceptance. While utilized more frequently in health education, community research, and educational research with older children, participatory research with young children is an emerging paradigm in qualitative research approaches. Such practices are designed to provide an authentic look into children's thoughts, insights, and interpretations of their lived experiences. Participatory research practices coincide with contemporary theoretical views of children and childhood. Within the early childhood field, approaches to designing collaborative work and participatory research are informed by theoretical understandings of the child as competent and capable as proposed by Loris Malaguzzi and scholars from Reggio Emilia, Italy in the early 1990s (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993) and further explored by scholars acknowledging and empowering children as experts on their own lives (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Kellett, 2011; Mayall, 2000). Additionally, a substantial, yet growing, body of participatory literature seeks to reposition the role and participation of young children in educational research, ethics, policy, and practice (Cannella, 2014; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Dahlberg & Moss, 2004; Davies, 2014; Eckhoff, 2015; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Hatch, 2014; Kellett, 2011; Sellers, 2013; Water, 2018).

Researchers undertaking participatory research with children will find themselves confronting cultural perspectives and institutional policies that typically work to do things *to* children rather than working *alongside* children (Runeson, Enskar, Elander, & Hermeren, 2001; Sandbaek, 1999). A core principal of

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participatory research is that the process ultimately generates knowledge for both participants and researchers rather than serving as a process to gather knowledge from groups of passive research participants. Traditional research practices place responsibility for the design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination of research almost exclusively on the adult researcher. Such designs are aligned with developmentalist views of child development that maintain that young children are emotionally, socially, physically, and cognitively immature. A view that limits children's power and decreases adults' willingness to take seriously their ideas and understandings (Oakley, 1994). Traditional qualitative research paradigms involving young children have also relied upon the collection of supplemental data from the significant adults or professionals involved in children's lives inferring that data generated from the children themselves would not be sufficient in and of itself to respond to research questions. These practices and assumptions place children in a position of *less than* and work to inhibit adults' understandings of their perspectives, ideas, and considerations. Conversely, participatory practices aim to highlight the research spaces that expand children's active engagement in research and in turn, provide rich insight into the lives of children and encourages to them to be viewed as experts in their own lives (Gallagher, 2008).

As a researcher dedicated to understanding the lives of children, I begin each new invitation to research examining the roles, rules, rights, and responsibilities of collaborative work with young children. My own research begins with contemporary understandings of participatory work as grounded within a community of learners where adults and children alike are learners as they engage together in inquiry, reflection, experimentation, advice, and support (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sellers, 2013). Partnerships can be defined as "a social practice achieved through and characterized by trust, mutuality and reciprocity" (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009, p. 8). Collaborative research relationships and participatory paradigms position children in the forefront as integral partners in the development of research questions, descriptions, interpretations and analyses. Collaborative work affirms the role of children as children at different points in the research process and acknowledges that children are competent beings living within complex social and cultural settings (Clark & Moss, 2001; Lansdown, 2005). As such, children are understood and treated as competent to share their thoughts and opinions in a variety of verbal and visual forms. Participatory research and collaborative work with children are ethical practices involving unique roles and responsibilities for both children and adult researchers. As with any partnership, the adult researcher must value children's understandings of cultural norms and related expectations as collaboration cannot be achieved in a setting dominated by a singular or outside cultural orientation.

Frameworks Supporting Understandings of Children’s Participatory Engagement

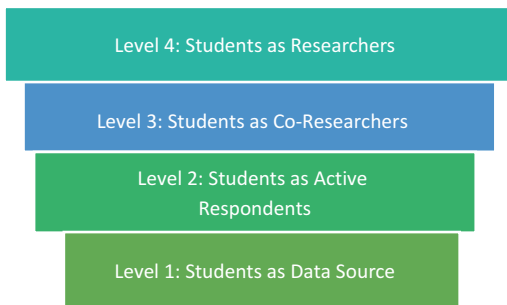
Within this participatory view of children engaged within the process of research, I present Fielding’s (2001) four level model of student participation which delineates the nuances within the roles of children and adults engaged in participatory work within educational settings. Fielding’s model distinguishes between the participation roles of students as sources of data, students as active respondents, students as co-researcher, and students as researchers (Fig. 1.1). Within Fielding’s model, the 4th level – students as researchers -is conceived as the most intensive and, ultimately, the rarest form of participation with students.

Fielding’s 1st level – Students as Data Source – occurs in work that involves students as recipients of adult actions and interactions. Within this first level, researchers and educators are interested in exploring student understanding and perceptions in order to more effectively work with students. Data in this level is generally dictated by adults and takes the form of student work samples and examples of past student performance. Examples of early childhood research involving students as data sources include research investigations exploring student work products and other aspects of curriculum learning. A key distinction of this level is that student involvement is best described as non-direct in that their work informs understandings but the students are not in active/reactive roles.

Fielding’s 2nd level – Students as Active Respondents – involves students as discussants that have valuable information to share with adults. At this level, adults ask questions and listen carefully to students in order to better understand how children learn and ways to enhance teaching and learning. When students take on the role of active respondents, they have opportunities to share insights, ideas, and understandings within a research agenda determined by the adult researcher(s). Surveys, interviews, and focus groups are just a few examples of approaches to data collection with young children that fall under this level of participation.

In Fielding’s 3rd level – Students as Co-Researchers – adults recognize the need to engage students as partners in the learning process in order to deepen and support their learning. Adults work to listen and enact dialogue with students as both parties work collaboratively to research aspects of teaching and learning. This level of

Fig. 1.1 Fielding’s (2001) four level model of student participation



participation involves more collaborative processes than the previous two levels which indicates more of a give-and-take relationship between the adult(s) and children as decision-making and power-sharing becomes consistent components of the research process.

In Fielding's 4th level – Students as Researchers – students take initiative in researching how best to support their learning and understanding in the classroom. Adults take on the task of listening to students in order to find ways to contribute to the student's learning process. Within the Students as Researchers role, Fielding underscores that all involved parties work to develop true partnerships where each are respected and valued for their expertise. Improvement through involvement is a means to enhance the communication and learning outcomes for all students through direct and supported action. It is not until Fielding's 4th level that the adult researcher or educator truly makes the paradigm shift from their actions as a means to 'do to' children to an understanding that they can 'work with' children.

As Fielding's model indicates, the involvement of children in participatory research can range from superficial inclusion to collaborative, personally significant engagement. As part of token or superficial inclusion, children can be encouraged to consult with adult researchers as their perspectives and ideas are viewed as valuable but this type of involvement differs from meaningful engagement in collaborative work. To clarify these differences Lansdown's (2005) framework is particularly useful in differentiating the degrees of children's participation within educational and social experiences – consultation, participatory processes, and self-initiation.

When adult researchers invite children into work through a consultation role they are acknowledging that children have important perspectives and unique experiences to share that can inform adult understandings. The process of consultation in work involving children and adults is generally characterised as adult initiated, organized and managed. Children engaged in consultation typically respond to a preconceived, adult agenda but they lack any real possibility to control the outcomes of the work (Lansdown, 2005). Consultation experiences can involve responding to research questions or prompts through surveys, interviews or non-traditional sources of data including drawing, performances, or digital media.

In Lansdown's model, children involved in work characterized as participatory move past the bounds of the consultation role and engage in experiences that underscore the collaborative nature of a project. Participatory processes in work involving children and adults are generally characterized as adult initiated but also empower children to influence or shape the work and any potential outcomes (Lansdown, 2005). Importantly, participatory processes allow for increasing levels of self-directed action by children over a period of time. In this sense, children are encouraged to use their experiences to deepen and extend their involvement over the course of the project. Over time, children may take on more responsibility and assert their agency to make decisions based upon the knowledge and experiences gained during earlier phases of the work. This is an important consideration for researchers interested in supporting children's participation as research involves a variety of skills that can be developed over time with careful scaffolding and targeted supports for young children.

Lansdown's third category of involvement – self-initiated processes – differs from participatory processes in that children define their work and are not merely responding to an adult agenda. In this role children select areas or ideas of interest and determine which methods of investigation and inquiry will be used. Self-initiated processes in work involving children and adults are generally characterized as focusing in on issues of concern identified by children themselves where they also determine the pace, direction, and outcomes of the work. In this category, adults serve as facilitators rather than leaders as children develop and negotiate their own opportunities for engagement and exploration. The processes of participation and self-initiation in Lansdown's framework require the adult researcher to have given significant thought, time, and effort to the understanding that participatory work requires more than a mere desire to provide a platform for children to share their voices. These levels of work require the adult researcher to attend to issues of children's agency in such a way as to directly confront preconceived understandings children's capabilities. Such confrontation is necessary in order to examine the validity of the research methodologies that create opportunities for children to take an active role in the "...process of influencing decisions, policies and services that impact on their lives" (Lansdown, 2005, p. 69).

The frameworks developed by Fielding (2001) and Lansdown (2005) provide useful entry points for researchers interested in supporting young children's engagement during research in early learning environments. Additionally, the frameworks identify particular areas of concern for early childhood researchers as young children typically have less experience with the processes of research than older children and adults. Engaging young children in participatory research will require researchers to work within a continuous cycle of observation, reflection, and adaptation alongside children and to document the children's engagement in order to make informed decisions about the supports children may need throughout the investigation. Even as we develop and support participatory experiences that attend to the particular needs of young children, we must also accept that our interactions with young children in research will often be unequal and that developing and presenting an accurate representation of their 'multi-voicedness' will pose numerous challenges for early childhood researchers (Horgan, 2017).

Understanding Children's Experience of Place: Out-of-School Learning

As children's perspectives of their own experiences and understandings are fluid and performative (Warming, 2011), participatory engagement in researching with children requires an emphasis on building research relationships with children over time rather than a more traditional protocol where researchers move into and out of children's spaces quickly. In the remainder of this chapter I present an illustrative research vignette interwoven with identified conceptual connections to participatory

engagements outlined by Fielding (2001) and Lansdown (2005). The vignette documents the experiences of a group of preschool children as they use digital media to capture their actions during an informal class field trip. The vignette is drawn from a multi-year project investigating preschoolers' use of digital media during their school experiences as the media was embedded into the everyday experiences in their classrooms. This research aimed to explore, through children's imagery, their evolving understandings of place-based learning over an extended period of time. The presentation of this this vignette below includes research aims, data collection methods, methods of analysis, and ethical issues interspersed with a discussion highlighting the roles of the child, teacher, and place in learning.

Research Perspectives

Since the early 1930s with Lucy Mitchell's seminal writings, the field trip has been viewed as an essential element of children's early school experiences (Mitchell, 1934). Taking a class walk or a field trip in the community can encourage children's learning and engagement in ways that are a far cry from the scripted lessons and paced curriculums used in many classrooms. Many researchers have investigated students' knowledge gains and content learning that occur during adult-led, highly structured field trips (Davidson, Passmore, & Anderson, 2010; DeMarie, 2001; Matthews, 2002; Saul, 1993; Taylor, Morris, & Cordeau-Young, 1997; Zoldosova, & Prokop, 2006). However, given contemporary, re-conceptualized understandings of the young child as competent and complex social learners, the highly structured field trip does not align with, nor recognize, the many modalities by which children learn, express, and communicate. Within a participatory framework, field trips can be viewed as experiential, authentic group events that encourage and promote new ways of knowing or experiencing an object, concept, or operation (Scarce, 1997) In this sense, and consistent with the field trip described here, informal field trips are typically teacher-initiated but are less structured in order to offer children opportunities for choice concerning their activities or actions within the environment.

Informal, field-based experiences defy traditional notions of what teaching and learning look like in school settings as the traditional roles of teachers and students become blurred when they engage together in new experiences beyond the scope of the classroom. Tal and Morag (2009) present an understanding of field trips as out-of-the-classroom experiences at interactive locations designed for educational purposes. The notion of experience and interactivity is a central component of social-constructivist understandings of knowledge development and learning within a group context. Experiential-learning theory highlights the central role of experience within the learning process (Kolbe, 1984). Placing primary importance on experience in learning brings the child and notions of playful, engaging learning to the forefront. Additionally, contemporary conceptions of learning emphasize the contextual nature of learning as any educational experience is always situated within