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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN:
TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper proposes an inclusive epistemological lens for the design and implementation of participatory research involving children. While multisensory and participatory methodologies have become more popular across a range of disciplines, the epistemological underpinnings that shape how these methods are conceptualised, undertaken, and data analysed from them remain inconsistent. Drawing upon recent debates surrounding participation, coconstruction, children's agency, and methodological inclusivity, this paper argues for a collective epistemology rooted in inclusion. By synthesising literature across participatory methods, childhood studies, and research in special and inclusive education, a model of Inclusive Epistemology for Children's Participation in Research (IECPR) is introduced. The model is intended to support researchers to more consistently conceptualise, employ and enable children's participation within research that concerns them. This lens is intended to support more ethical and meaningful engagement with

children, taking into account their experiences and competencies, ultimately aiming to strengthen the quality and credibility of research conceptualised as 'participatory.'

Keywords

participatory research, children, inclusive research, multi-sensory methods, epistemology, coconstruction

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a literature-informed suggested epistemological lens through which researchers may view participatory research involving children. The intention of this paper is to move towards creating a collective socially inclusive approach to participatory research. Many researchers are now advocates of seeking 'innovative' ways to capture children's voices in their studies, acknowledging that children have both the right to have their voices heard and that data are often richer as a result of children's involvement (Coyne & Carter, 2018). There is a relatively recent yet consistent cross-disciplinary rise in the number of researchers employing multi-sensory methodologies to support capturing children's voices. Yet, the ways in which these are implemented from a methodological perspective can be argued to be disparate (Sevon et al., 2025). This can be partly explained by the myriad epistemological perspectives that exist around the nature of conducting participatory research with vulnerable groups.

This paper argues that the increasing body of participatory research involving children would benefit from a collective epistemology, or perhaps more accessibly termed a set of research values, which underpin effective implementation of multi-sensory methodologies involving children. This is extended to suggest that the collective epistemology should be underpinned by aspirations of and values related to inclusive research practice, leading to meaningful and ethical participation.

BACKGROUND

There is a range of interconnected literature bases that will be drawn upon in this paper to inform the development of a suggested epistemological lens relating to participatory research with children. The emergence of multi-sensory methodologies when conducting research with children and the methodological questions that this has raised for the research community are explored. The complexities around 'how far' children should be involved in such research and whether or not true co-construction can and should be strived for are then discussed. Once these literature bases have been explored,

the paper then moves on to presenting a suggested socially inclusive epistemological lens through which research involving children can be viewed. This is intended to be a useful epistemological approach to consider for those conducting research involving children.

Conducting research involving children

Researchers working across a range of disciplines advocate conducting research 'with' children, rather than 'about' children, aiming to involve children as participants, rather than to capture views on their behalf (Christensen & James, 2008). This is a recent methodological shift in some disciplines; however, most research communities now positively acknowledge the potential for children to meaningfully participate in research that is relevant to them. Yet, the methodological practices put in place to enable the involvement of children in research lack consistency, both in terms of the epistemological principles that drive the choice of methods and the subsequent implementation of them (Montreuil et al., 2021).

Sevon et al. (2025) undertook a systematic review of 75 articles which claim to undertake participatory methods of research with young children. They identified that "few efforts have been made to map methodological solutions related to children's participation" (p. 1002). Furthermore, the researchers found that many methods could be viewed as participatory in nature, but the research did not always "ideologically commit to address children's participation in the research process" (p.1013), highlighting the aforementioned disparity in epistemological principles that guide the research and the action of the research itself.

Clearly, this lack of consistency could be problematic in terms of the potential quality, credibility and overall usefulness of findings generated from participatory research involving children. Of course, there is a recognised need for adaptability in the methodology that researchers implement, particularly when we consider discipline-specific research requirements. However, it is clear that some level of commonality of approach in terms of epistemological underpinnings and resulting methodological implementation is required to build robust and ethical approaches to research claiming to be participatory (Siklander et al., 2020).

In 2021, Montreuil et al. undertook a review of the literature pertaining to context, mechanisms and outcomes of participatory research involving children. The review evidenced the aforementioned lack of consistency in research approach. The researchers noted that despite an increase in researchers making use of participatory methods involving children, descriptions of how these were implemented were rare. Additionally, there were many instances in which participatory research had been claimed in the researchers' methodological descriptions, but these descriptions did not always appear to involve participation from children. This highlights issues with consistency in terms of definition in relation to participatory research with children, as well as highlights potential issues around reliability and validity across the piece. It could be argued that this inconsistency is rooted in a lack of consensus amongst the research community around the epistemological underpinnings that should drive research involving children.

The emergence of multi-sensory methodologies

A seminal contribution to the use of multisensory approaches in research with children is the work of Clark and Moss (2008), whose mosaic approach to data collection has become foundational across disciplines concerned with children's perspectives. Their approach originates from early years and participatory childhood studies but has had significant interdisciplinary methodological influence. Clark and Moss conceptualise children's perspectives as inherently multimodal, expressed through talk, drawing, photography, movement, play, and interaction with spaces and materials. Importantly, they frame these modes not merely as *data collection techniques*, but as legitimate forms of communication through which children make sense of their experiences.

The mosaic approach could therefore be argued to be epistemological as much as methodological. It embodies the assumption that children communicate meaningfully across multiple sensory channels, and that, researchers must attune themselves to these diverse forms of expression. Clark and Moss (2008) also foreground the importance of viewing children as cointerpreters of their own contributions. For

example, they advocate that photographs taken by children are not analysed solely through adult interpretation; instead, children are invited to discuss, arrange, annotate, or critique the images, thereby participating actively in the meaningmaking process. This dual emphasis on multimodality and cointerpretation directly challenges adultcentric research norms and has helped legitimise creative, flexible, and accessible approaches within participatory research.

The influence of Clark and Moss can be seen throughout contemporary participatory research, particularly in studies involving young children or those with diverse communication needs. Many current multisensory methods, such as childled tours, mapping activities, objectbased discussions, and visualnarrative workshops draw implicitly or explicitly from Mosaic principles (Clark, 2010; Gözütok & Özgün, 2024). Their work has thus played a central role in shifting the field toward approaches that recognise children's communicative competence, value sensory and visual data equally with verbal data, and position participation as a relational, iterative process. In doing so, Clark and Moss have provided much of the conceptual groundwork that underpins the current proliferation of multisensory methodologies and have helped to frame such methods as both ethically and epistemologically aligned with children's rights to express their views in ways meaningful to them. Yet, research that employs approaches rooted in mosaic methodology, claiming to be participatory, often lacks clear, transparent discussion on how far children were involved beyond being participants in data collection (Sevon et al., 2025).

Where descriptions of participatory research in published works have been richer, a range of methodological approaches and data collection methods are increasing in popularity amongst researchers seeking to involve children in their research (Montreuil et al., 2021). These multi-sensory methodologies are generally employed by researchers as a way to take into account the range of communication, sensory and physical needs that children may present with. Research in fields such as special and inclusive education, health, and human geography have seen the most obvious growth in the number of researchers employing multi-sensory approaches to collecting data, employing methods such

as photography, participant drawings, podcasting, child-led tours, transect walks, comic strips and radio workshops.

In their aforementioned systematic review, Sevon et al. (2025) identified 6 core categories of methods employed in participatory research with children: (1) multi-method and the mosaic approach; (2) observation and ethnography; (3) language-based methods; (4) visual methods; (5) creative and playful methods; (6) children as co-researchers. Sevon et al.'s contribution is particularly informative because it not only highlights the breadth of participatory techniques that can be employed but also reveals a deeper disciplinary uncertainty about what participation should constitute when the participants are young children. Their categorisation of methods illustrates the field's methodological creativity, yet the review also exposes how many published studies use multisensory or childcentred techniques without fully articulating the epistemological rationale behind them. Although many multi-sensory methods appear participatory, the underpinning assumptions about children's knowledge, agency, or role in coconstruction are often left implicit or unexplored. This raises questions regarding conceptual coherence; when the extent to which children are involved in the design, implementation and analysis of data resulting from the methods employed is unexplained, the reader is left to consider whether the researchers can meaningfully claim a participatory orientation.

Importantly, Sevon et al. (ibid) observed that the mere presence of multi-sensory methods does not guarantee children's genuine involvement in shaping research processes. A photography activity, for example, may be designed as an empowering opportunity for children to autonomously document their own perspectives, yet in practice may be moderated by adults in terms of what counts as permissible content, how the images are interpreted, and how they contribute to findings. This distinction highlights a central tension in the field: researchers are increasingly adopting participatory methods but not necessarily participatory epistemologies to accompany them. Sevon et al's review therefore strengthens the argument that a clearer, shared epistemological foundation is required, characterised by recognising children as competent meaningmakers and positions them as such.

DISCUSSION

Power and participation

A prevailing rationale for employing the above approaches lies in enabling the child participant to access the method, but also very often to take an active role in the implementation process related to the method. This can be done, for example, by a child operating a camera during a photography method or a child selecting drawings to be used in a storybook about their experiences. These examples highlight a fundamental shift in the way in which the roles of researcher and participant are conceptualised.

If we are to view the participant as having influence on the implementation of a given method, then we are to view that participant as having some power over the research design. This is at odds with the traditional view of the researcher as the actor with whom the 'power' resides, as it requires some level of distributed or shared power dynamic with regard to the participant (Gallagher, 2008). This fundamental shift is more pronounced when we consider that the participants are children and the researchers are adults, a relationship in which the power dynamic has consistently been in the adult's favour. The extent to which the child participant takes an active role in research lacks clarity in much of the existing literature (McFadden et al., 2023). Therefore, there is scope to refine adult-researcher perspectives (thus epistemological views) on how to enable the active participation of children in research that involves them.

The nature of participation in research involving children

There is much debate around whether or not it is possible to and, indeed, how far researchers should be aiming to co-construct research involving children. There is a wide-ranging spectrum of involvement that participatory research involving children can claim to employ, from involvement in data collection all the way to research co-construction. This somewhat umbrella term of 'participation' can make devising and implementing clear ethical and methodological guidelines on participatory research involving children problematic (Montreuil et al., 2021).

Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) highlight this issue by noting "while it is generally agreed that 'participation' is a positive attribute of research…there has been limited methodological reflection upon what the term actually means" (p.502). Similarly, over 25 years ago, Cleaver (1999) noted that organisations often co-opt the concept of participation and adopt it only in its most superficial form and formal expression. This lack of clarity related to the notion of participation in inclusive research could be extended to encompass not only what it means in terms of methodological decision-making, but also with regard to the epistemological underpinnings by which methodological decision-making is driven.

Fundamentally, there is a need for the research community, particularly in fields such as special and inclusive education where children are generally viewed as more vulnerable, to collectively assert a view on what effective 'participation' should look like for children. Without this, there is an acknowledged problem with conceptual and methodological inconsistency when researchers claim to have undertaken participatory research with this group of participants. It may be that there is a collective view to be had that all research that simply 'involves' children in the work, i.e., as participants in data collection, is sufficiently 'participatory' to have intrinsic validity. However, current research in this field very much suggests that to be viewed as truly 'participatory' we must move past what can be thought of as tokenistic involvement in data collection. Instead, many argue that it is our ethical duty to find ways of extending children's involvement in a piece of research, moving past data collection and into elements of co-construction (Carter & Coyne, 2024).

Yet, the above is particularly challenging in the field of special and inclusive research since child participants often possess a range of needs and competencies that can make participatory research more difficult to achieve. Indeed, it is useful here to reflect upon the work of Punch (2002), who presents an epistemological framework related to the nature of childhood. Punch identifies two historical perspectives on children; the first is that children are essentially indistinguishable from adults, and the other is that children are entirely different from adults. These polarised views on the nature of children are likely the reason

why participatory research with children was not deemed historically feasible or ethical. However, over the last 20 years or so, a third epistemological perspective has emerged: children are to be viewed as similar to adults but often possessing different competencies. This third perspective has meant that more researchers see the value in participatory research involving children, which has led to a plethora of multi-sensory approaches to data collection as explored above (Coyne & Carter, 2008).

Traditional epistemological views aligned with participatory research

While interpretivism has long underpinned research involving children by prioritising meaningmaking and lived experience, it is increasingly clear that traditional interpretivist thinking alone may be insufficient to capture the complexities of participatory research in inclusive contexts. Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is coconstructed between researcher and participant; however, the extent and nature of this coconstruction can vary widely depending on a child's competencies, communication needs, and the degree of agency afforded within the research design. Critical realism offers an additional lens, highlighting the influence of structural and contextual factors that shape children's participation. From a critical realist perspective, social, educational, familial, and institutional contexts inevitably influence how participation is enacted, meaningfully reminding researchers that children's voices are shaped by factors both within and beyond the research context. Together, interpretivism and critical realism support a more nuanced epistemological approach, one that recognises the coconstructed nature of knowledge while also acknowledging embedded inequalities and systemic constraints that can enable or inhibit children's participation (Messiha et al., 2024)

It is useful, here, to reflect upon McIntyre's (2014) model of participatory action research, articulated as involvement across the following research phases: (a) identify issues, (b) develop strategies, (c) implement plans, (d) observe activities, and (e) assess the outcomes. This is a purist epistemological lens through which to view participatory research as one in which participants are involved in all aspects of the research journey. However, prior research highlights that the realities of conducting participatory research involving children are rarely linear; the above highlighted contextual influences on children's

participation in research require researchers to iteratively and reflexively review their approaches at regular intervals. As a result, a 'practical framework' for children's participation in research is likely unhelpful in most contexts. If the values that embody an inclusive approach to children's participation are clearly defined and can then be used to ensure the practical considerations that follow be more effectively undertaken.

Participation and inclusion

If we accept that children's participation in research cannot be meaningfully understood without explicit attention to inclusion, Klocker's (2007) conceptualisation of 'thin' and 'thick' agency is particularly relevant to explore. Klocker argues that children's capacity to exercise agency in research is not fixed but instead fluctuates according to the environment in which the research is conducted. Thin agency refers to constrained opportunities for action within limiting contexts, while thick agency reflects expanded opportunities for decisionmaking and influence. Participatory research with children often highlights what could be termed 'thin' forms of agency, for example allowing children to choose their favourite photographs from a method or decide the spaces in which multi-sensory activities take place, whilst overlooking opportunities to share power at the level of research design, analysis, or dissemination. An inclusive epistemology requires researchers to consider how methodological choices either widen or narrow opportunities for 'thick' agency. Without prioritising opportunities for 'thick' agency, researchers' involvement of children could be argued to be tokenistic and fundamentally exclusive in approach, since the research findings are unlikely to afford children the ability to experience positive outcomes from the research in which they are involved.

A MODEL: INCLUSIVE EPISTEMOLOGY FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH (IECPR)

Building upon the prior arguments for identifying a collective epistemology to participatory research involving children, this section introduces a model of Inclusive Epistemology for Children's Participation Research (IECPR) designed to guide researchers in conceptualising and enacting meaningful participation in research

involving children. The circular nature of the model illustrates the interconnected and nonhierarchical nature of the values necessary for such research. Earlier in this paper, it was argued that inconsistencies in participatory research design often stem from researchers adopting participatory data collection methods without necessarily reflecting upon participatory epistemological foundations to the research (Sevon et al., 2025). By sharing a view on elements that conceptualise an inclusive epistemology in research of this nature, the aim is that researchers are persuaded to engage in thinking that moves beyond categorising participatory research with children as a sequence of discrete practical steps and more as an approach built upon inclusive epistemological commitments.

[Figure 1 here]

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER

As discussed earlier in this paper, equitable distribution of power is often challenging between child and adult researchers/participants in research. This is as a result of historic views on the differing nature of childhood and the notion that children may display different competencies that can render equitable power distribution problematic. What is argued for in this aspect of the model is not that equitable distribution of power be enacted in all participatory research involving children, rather that ways to share power with children be prioritised by researchers, wherever possible. This repositions children from roles that often solely encompass data collection sources and towards true participants in research that they are involved in. Examples of practical steps that can support equitable distribution of power include offering children the opportunity to shape research questions or phrasing in data collection methods to ensure accessible language is used throughout the study; or, employing members checking during adult-led data analysis to ensure children's perspectives on the data are captured.

ADVOCACY OF 'THICK' AGENCY

In order for research involving children to have the potential to benefit the child participants, researchers should commit to engaging in participatory research in which children are likely to be able to

voice their experiences, findings and views. This will, arguably, provide a more compelling ethical basis for involving children in research. In this element of the model, the inclusive epistemological view is defined as 'a commitment to supporting conditions in which children can exercise 'thick' rather than 'thin' forms of agency.' Thick agency, as originally conceptualised by Klocker (2007), requires opportunities for children not only to participate in data-generating activities but also to influence how the research is managed, how meanings are constructed and how findings are represented. From a practical perspective, advocating for thick agency means designing methods that invite children to articulate preferences, challenge adult interpretations, and meaningfully influence analytical or interpretive decisions where feasible. This inclusive commitment on the part of the adult researcher strengthens the ethical integrity of participatory research by ensuring that children's involvement has the potential to benefit those who partake in it.

BEYOND TOKENISM IN RESEARCH DESIGN

Linked to the advocation of 'thick' agency, this element of the model urges researchers to embed children's involvement meaningfully across the research process. Moving beyond tokenism requires researchers to critically assess whether children's contributions genuinely shape methodological and interpretive decisions, or whether participatory activities primarily legitimise pre-determined adult agendas. Taken together with the promotion of 'thick agency,' inclusive participatory research better positions children to experience both meaningful contributions to the research process and the potential to use the findings to positively influence their own experiences. An inclusive epistemology therefore positions participation not as the inclusion of isolated activities, typically linked to the collection of data, but as an ongoing ethical and methodological negotiation that requires a genuine commitment to meaningful participation of children in research.

ETHICAL TRANSPARENCY

Ethical transparency is intended to include essential ethical considerations that inevitably form part of participatory research (voluntary consent and informed participation, for example) but is

intended to stretch beyond this and into ethical transparency across all interactions between adult and child researcher. This requires that researchers make explicit the assumptions, boundaries, and decision-making processes that shape children's involvement, ensuring clarity around roles, expectations, and responsibilities. Its placement within the circular model signifies that ethical decision-making should be embedded throughout the research process, rather than confined to the methodological design stage. In earlier sections of this paper, it was highlighted that a range of studies appear to claim participatory approaches but offer minimal detail about how participation may have been enacted, beyond child-involvement in data collection activity (Sevon et al., 2025). Positioning ethical transparency within the model reflects that transparency is a condition that must operate at every point in the research process.

RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

Researcher reflexivity is central to understanding how far a researcher's own epistemological assumptions, values, and biases may support or hinder children's participation in research. Engaging reflexively encourages researchers to identify their personal views on what the term 'participatory research' means when involving children; for some it may constitute full co-construction whereas for others it may involve collaboration on specific elements/stages of the research. Taking time to articulate one's epistemological view on the participation of children in research will better inform and defend the methodological decision-making that follows in such research. Transparent reflexive practice therefore strengthens both the internal coherence and the external credibility of participatory research, enabling readers to understand how the researcher's positionality has shaped the methodological and analytic approaches undertaken in the study reported on.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The IECPR model introduced here is intended to provide a useful epistemological scaffold for researchers designing participatory studies with children. Rather than presenting a specific set of decision-making principles for practicalising studies, it should be viewed more as a set of values that, if enacted effectively, make for more ethically

transparent and impactful participatory studies involving children. This paper is not intended to assert a position on how far children should be involved in research in order to meet the definition of 'participatory;' it does, however, assert a position on the values that should underpin effective participatory research involving children.

Participatory research can be conceptualised as an evolving field, experiencing methodological innovation that is often accompanied by an epistemological inconsistency/lack of conceptual clarity in the research shared. An inclusive epistemological stance can provide muchneeded coherence by grounding participatory methodological practices in values of equity, reflexivity and transparency. The proposed IECPR model offers a conceptual tool through which researchers can more clearly articulate, justify, and evaluate children's participation in research. By accepting these values at the beginning of a research project, researchers can better ensure meaningful and ethical engagement with children in the research they conduct. Ultimately, embedding inclusive epistemology from the point of research design has the potential to enhance not only methodological rigor, but also the impact of research that aims to represent children's experiences.

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