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Finding the balance: the choreography of participatory research with children and young people

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Research (PR), which places participants at the foreground, is an evolving field spanning several disciplines. This article critiques conceptual tensions surrounding the notion of participation itself and how PR tenets can be engaged with children (under 18). We propose an innovative heuristic framework to be used flexibly by the adult facilitator to aid decision-making when seeking balance between intervention and giving young participants room for expression. It serves as an aide memoire to facilitate cognisance of issues of control and directiveness that could potentially diminish children's voices, containing more explicit emphasis on the necessary movement between modes of adult facilitator involvement than existing PR models. Our proposed modes, 'organic and unbridled', 'organic yet enabling', 'enabled and shaping', are fleshed out and illustrated with reference to our own PR projects. We relate these modes to easily-called-to-mind notions, inspired by the metaphor of the choreography of dance: 'stepping-in'; 'stepping-out'; 'stepping-on-toes'.

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Introduction

Participatory research (PR) assumes a variety of forms, though is considered to be still emerging and developing maturity as a research methodology (Telleria 2020). We acknowledge, as Brown (2021) has, that it is a complex and sometimes contested concept and methodology. It provides opportunities for (typically disenfranchised) participants to work in partnership with researchers to solve problems of concern to them, develop relevant skills, increase their understanding of their environment, and create mutual support systems (Israel *et al.* 2003), or to redress power imbalances inherent in research (Telleria 2020). As we understand it, PR rejects the notion of adultism, which dictates that only adults are viewed as credible authorities while young people serve as recipients of knowledge and action (Bettencourt 2020), and is, thus, distinguished by affording voice to those who might not usually have a platform. We use PR to denote a way of adults working collegially with participants that recognizes locally produced knowledges and the unique strengths each person brings (Kellogg Foundation 1992) to engender transformation.

Ambiguity around maintaining an authentic participatory relationship, which lies at the heart of PR, is an enduring issue debated in the methodological literature (see, for example, Wyness 2012). The methodological principle of participation can often be glossed over, or is assumed to be automatically generated, provided the research possesses some form of collaborative element (Fox 2020). This can subsequently diminish critical awareness of adults' involvement in the research

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and inhibit questioning around, for instance, how much adults might have unwittingly framed or front-loaded the project, or whether working collegially means adults need to remain entirely passive. Although the widely cited models of participation (see Hart 1992, Treseder 1997) conceptualize a full spectrum of participation, starting from tokenism ascending to full participation, in accordance with Scott *et al.* (2015), we contend that this obscures the complexity which sometimes necessitates high levels of adult involvement to encourage the process. Furthermore, Hart (1992) and Treseder's (1997) models of participation do little to acknowledge what Fitzgerald *et al.* (2021, p. 421) describe as the 'usually unpredictable, messy and confusing situations that arise in the practice of doing participatory research with young people', or encourage researchers to make this aspect transparent. An additional crucial concern, highlighted by Cahill and Hart (2006) and Brown (2021), is that participation is often used indiscriminately to refer to a wide variety of practices. It can facilitate opportunities that critique power relations and generate new possibilities (Ginwright 2008), yet in practice we note that it is often difficult to strike a balance between adults offering more direction, and young participants taking centre-stage.

To address such issues, we present in this article a novel heuristic framework, inspired by the metaphor of the choreography of dance, in its interpretive and improvisational form. It places the spotlight on the upper portion of Hart's (1992) and Treseder's (1997) models of participation, adding further nuance in terms of how adults can conceive of their involvement and its impact on young participants. We do not present it as an alternative way of conducting PR, nor, with a nod to Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) and Massumi (2002), as a prescriptive recipe or formula. It is intended to serve as a novel tool for researchers or practitioners, such as teachers, youth workers or early childhood educators to use when reflecting-in-action on where they might have: 'stepped-in' to direct or support the participants or to facilitate conversations; 'stepped-out' to enable the participants to direct the project in whichever way they wished; or even 'stepped-on-toes' of participants as they try to negotiate how much intervention is required. These notions, which are intended to enable easy recall and visualization in the moment, relate to the modes of participation contained within our heuristic framework, which are explained later on.

The article begins by providing a brief history to contextualize PR's emergence, before examining issues relating directly to maintaining the balance of adult intervention and child-initiated decision-making, which gave us impetus to develop our heuristic framework. It comprises three modes between which the adult facilitator can move, to unsettle the problematic assumption, discussed below, that 'full' participation means complete passivity on the part of the adult facilitator. To flesh out and illustrate these modes, we draw upon excerpts from our own PR projects: (a) the plastics project, set in a non-formal educational context with young people and (b) the inclusion project, involving younger children in a school context.

Brief history of participatory research

PR was introduced in the mid-twentieth century, amidst growing dissatisfaction with the quest for objectivity associated with conventional methodologies (Clark 2004), subsumption of qualitative methodologies into the social scientific research methodology repertoire (Charmaz 2006), and recognition of the importance of attending to social processes to counteract the reductive effects of research seeking causal models and generalization (Holland *et al.* 2010). Researcher detachment and neutrality were regarded by PR advocates to contravene democratic principles and limit full understanding of the way people defined and acted towards issues affecting them (Clark 2004); thus, PR has become particularly concerned with the democratization of knowledge-making and inequalities of power (Chevalier and Buckles 2019). No longer operating as the researched, participants of PR could act with the authority and autonomy formerly ascribed to the researcher (Clark 2004), becoming actively involved in data generation instead of remaining passive recipients of more traditional methods such as surveys, which attempt to gather data on, rather than generate data with, them (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

Youth work, social work and allied specialisms, international development and human geography are some of the fields that have adopted PR, bringing with them an expectation that those at the heart of the research would be in an optimal place to identify and analyse their concerns, and thus create context-sensitive solutions. Historically, children have been denied the right to make decisions about matters affecting them, being viewed as inexperienced and incapable of making rational decisions (Cunningham 1996); vulnerable, innocent and adhering to societal norms (Rose and Shevlin 2004). However, the realization that children's views would be taken seriously in PR, in the educational domain, was developing at a slower rate relative to professional specialisms such as social work (Clark 2004).

The turn in the 1990s towards a more 'social' study of childhood was underpinned by growing dissatisfaction with earlier notions of childhood based on immaturity, fuelled by stage-based, developmental notions (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008, 500). Indeed, those who challenge the latter view argue that even young children can make rational decisions (Christensen and James 2008). Consequently, a shift in thinking about childhood resulted in a child PR movement, which has brought a new understanding of children's views and experiences, values and competencies (Alderson 2012), their recognition as social actors, and the increased attention paid to children's rights (persons under the age of 18) (UN General Assembly 1989). It is the 'rights agenda' that is widely purported to have accelerated the use of PR in educational research (Holland *et al.* 2010, p. 361).

Problematizing participatory research

Despite PR's widespread adoption, acknowledgement that it is no less problematic than any other research method is imperative (Wyness 2012; Hammersley 2016). Recognition of the dominant notions of agency and power relations, upon which participation is predicated, is part of subjecting it to critical examination (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008), without which the mere rhetoric of participation and resultant ambiguity of praxis prevails (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Moreover, Alderson's (2012) disquiet of the lack of attention to research and children's rights indicates that some interpretative, critical work is warranted to translate its principles into research practice. This includes examining the connection between how we conceive of participation, along with empowerment and its implications for understandings of PR that emphasize a primarily child-directed and child-initiated approach.

There are numerous denotations of PR. Many focus on Participant Action Research (PAR), which challenges hegemonic norms by training communities or groups to identify and analyse problems relevant to their lives, take action and evaluate the outcomes (Ozer 2017); these include, but are not limited to, community-based PR, feminist PR, action research and youth-led PAR. Each shares a commitment to working in partnership with potentially marginalized communities to reduce or eliminate inequities, or with groups of young people to identify problems, cycle through research and action research processes, and advocate to stakeholders for solutions.

Whilst there is much evidence of successful use of PR (see Ozer and Wright 2012, Ozer 2017, Stoudt *et al.* 2012), questions surrounding participation have come to be dominated by the notion of continuums or levels. However, critics articulate a need for attention now to shift away from, firstly, how much participation is enough? (Sinclair 2004), and, secondly, the notion that PR is tokenistic unless initiated and guided by the child (Kellett 2011). In addition, there is dissensus regarding the extent to which children should take ownership of a project for it to truly be deemed PR, with definitions ranging from full ownership (Ozer and Wright 2012), to engagement in any aspect of the process (Langhout and Thomas 2010).

Interpretations based on the abovementioned children's rights agenda indicate that the sharing of power between adults and children constitutes the most democratic approach. Nonetheless, although initially behind the representation of participation in terms of ascending rungs on a ladder, Hart (1992) concedes that it is not necessary for children to always operate at the highest possible levels of participation depicted in his ladder. Indeed, different children, with differing

experiential knowledge, and at various times, might prefer to contribute with fluctuating modes of involvement or responsibility; the important principle for PR is to provide space for eliciting children's 'true voices' (Spyrou 2016, p. 8), so that they might articulate their preferences for involvement. Rather than striving to give children simply more power, there is a need to create an environment within which children can participate with, and alongside, adults (Taft 2015), in undertermined ways that facilitate children's decision-making about the type and frequency of their involvement (Holland *et al.* 2010). An ascending, linear representation of participation – whether as a continuum, sliding scale or ladder – arguably reinforces an assumption that as adult facilitators' passivity increases, so too does authentic participation and empowerment of participants.

The concept of empowerment is tightly enmeshed with participation and the handing over of greater control to those usually excluded (Telleria 2020). Discussions over how to engender it in practice appear to denote the idea of the transferral of power from adults to children as always being a controlled and intentional act. However, while handing over the 'stick' of power (Chambers 1995, p. 34) is a laudable and pivotal tenet of PR, critics note that it is a more convoluted issue than assumed: the shifting of power can be in flux (Brown 2021); and, without constant critical reflexivity, the power balance can flip in unintended ways (Telleria 2020). Thus, it is important to acknowledge Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) caution over conceptualizing power as something that is given to young people by adults, along with their argument for greater recognition of children's capacity to reinterpret gestures designed by adults and ability to negotiate and navigate the novel PR situation along with the social dynamics therein. Well-intended gestures, such as an adult asking a child to be involved in an activity, may not necessarily have the result envisaged. While intended as a strategy to relinquish their power, the adult may engage techniques reflecting socially instituted notions of improving children, or even those which perpetuate dutiful habits of response on the part of the child, such as agreeing to an adult's suggestion or request to join in.

There is a related assumption that children's agency can only be cultivated through a rejection of facilitating adults' attempts to shape their learning activity. This is expressed succinctly by Punch (2016, p. 185) who questions the assumption that: 'adult-imposed structure or power over children is negative and something children should assert their agency to resist or counteract'. She suggests that a more critical, nuanced, dynamic and complex conception of agency is necessary to understand how to balance children's agentic rights with their natural states as children, thus echoing Lancaster and Kirby's (2010) contention that children should be approached as experts on their lives, but not the only experts.

We argue for an interpretation of PR that is explicit in catering for nuance surrounding adults' decisions to provide support or remain a passive on-looker. The three modes in our heuristic framework, explained below, represent qualitatively different modes of interacting with the young participants during the practice of PR. They reflect the dynamism and responsiveness incumbent on the adult facilitator when striving to foster an equitable partnership with young participants. The aim would be for the adult facilitator to move between these modes flexibly and fluidly to attain a learning environment where all can benefit from the ideas, and sometimes impulses of others, in a manner that Masumi (2002, p. 19) would describe as a 'creative contagion', where innovation, adaptation, improvisation and invention are paramount.

The three modes within our framework are not organized to depict ascent, nor a sliding scale of participation and since it comprises just three modes it can easily be held in the adult facilitator's mind when in the flow. The choreography metaphor we utilize to explain the heuristic framework is intended to divert attention from hierarchical, ascending representations of PR practice. Moreover, it recognizes the 'messiness' (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2021) of PR practice that warrants quick decision-making or immediate changes of direction. To capture the nimble footwork required, we draw figuratively on the dance choreographer which reflects the role of an adult facilitator in PR who may step into the dance, to harness ideas and provide suggestions in a light-touch manner (organic yet enabling); or out, away from the dance, observing from the side-lines (organic and unbridled); or intervening to reset, or provide further skills to help them focus on their aims

(enabled and shaping). We utilize dance-related notions (stepping in, out, on toes) in our heuristic framework to make it a directly practical tool that reminds facilitating adults of the impacts of their next decision on young participants' participation.

The practice of PR as 'choreography'

The choreography of dance metaphor, which provided the impetus for our development of the novel heuristic framework, was borne out of the shared reflection following our two recent PR projects that nimble footwork was required when responding to voice, context and experiences. Excerpts from both projects are incorporated below into our explanation of the framework's components. Perpetual responsiveness to participants' initial needs and developing interests, we argue, lends the practice of PR an organic nature commensurable with choreographing a dance. Responding to, and taking actions with, participants is integral to PR and such a disposition is reliant upon the integration of feeling, thinking and acting (Selener 1997). We argue such emphasis on fluidity and exploration of ways to give form to emergent ideas reinforces the notion, echoed by Chevalier and Buckles (2019), that the practice of PR is more of an art than a science. Our framework recognizes the exploratory nature of dance, resonating with the work by bell hooks (1984), who speaks of a freedom in education where teaching becomes a performative act offering space, change, invention and spontaneous shifts.

We use the metaphor of the choreography of dance to evoke imagery, not of formalized dances with rigid routines (e.g. waltz), but interpretive acts involving perpetual negotiation, drawing out and cultivating expressions and improvisation, whereby one dancer responds to another (e.g. free-form). This important emergent quality, however, does not preclude the involvement of the choreographer (adult facilitator in PR) who might offer assistance and guidance in the dance's formation, to develop a more formalized routine with longer movements. Thus, in respect of our problematization of PR, above, where we unsettled the assumption that adult intervention is automatically regarded as inhibiting, the choreography metaphor helps us place the spotlight on the ways the adult facilitator can respond as they negotiate and respond to young participants. Moreover, commensurate with the tenets of PR, the dance metaphor helps to make 'visible what has no business being seen, and make a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (Rancière 2004, p. 30). Thus, the act of dancing helps give form or expression to what might have remained previously unvoiced or unnoticed.

We conceive of the different forms of dance as aligning with differing modes of involvement in PR. For example, the purely aesthetic expression of thoughts in dance (Klein and Noeth 2011) relates to the aspect of PR that presents opportunities for young participants to use creative and innovative methods that emerge from their own experiences and interests, to which we assign the term 'organic and unbridled'. Another representation aligns with Kipling Brown's (2014) notion of creative dance that draws on the dancers' imagination and allows them to create their own movement and style, which is then guided by the choreographer; this conception we term 'organic yet enabling' since it still provides opportunities for children to form initial ideas based on their lived experience, yet the adults offer expertise for children merely to consider. The final manifestation combines the dancers' innermost thoughts, feelings and emotions with the aesthetics and pattern of dance (Uji and Justin 2014), which resonates with the 'enabled and shaping' mode within our framework, whereby adults observe and adapt the children's ideas to fulfil the project's aims. This does not preclude adults adapting their own thinking in response to children's thoughts and feelings about complex concepts.

Our proposed heuristic framework

This section of the article explains our proposed heuristic framework. Before presenting a visual representation of it, we provide illustrative examples from research projects with younger children and

young people (under 18), demonstrating where we considered, retrospectively, the different modes of involvement to have occurred, and where an application of the framework might have assisted our thinking about the participants' engagement. The key intent of the framework is to facilitate adults' decision-making in PR by carefully constructing modes of direction, facilitation or non-intervention, and thus strengthen the possibilities for participant engagement.

PR projects

The excerpts below are drawn from two research projects: (a) a project involving working with 7–16 year-olds in addressing the problem of single-use plastics disposal in the environment (plastics project); (b) a project focusing on 4–5 year olds' perceptions of inclusion in pedagogical activities in the Reception class (inclusion project).

Plastics project overview

The plastics project represented a discrete component within an ongoing multidisciplinary project, investigating methods of engaging young people in addressing the environmental problem of single-use plastics-waste. It involved working in partnership with a group of young people from a youth group towards an undetermined output, which was loosely framed by the idea of transforming the public's behaviours regarding use and disposal of single-use plastic items. The young people could decide what slant to adopt and how they might help educate, raise awareness, or otherwise connect with their chosen subset of the population on how to reduce environmental damage caused by plastic waste. They opted to convey their environmentally responsible message through designing a range of creative products that could be disseminated widely, via digital platforms, to a young audience. The research team (facilitating adults) presented themselves not only as facilitators of the process, from idea generation to final product, but as a resource pool of expertise to be recruited to provide technical direction at the young people's behest. As the young people wished to create an animation featuring 2D drawings of comical plastic litter characters, backed by a rap reflecting their environmentally conscious narrative, this resource pool comprised youth work professionals with expertise in audio-visual animation, story-boarding and rap-writing techniques.

The young people were encouraged to make collective decisions during the process and set the agenda according to their preferred ways of working together: where, how often they wanted to meet; whether to break into sub-groups to accomplish tasks they considered important. We wanted to maintain the informal atmosphere of their usual way of working in the youth group setting. Our aim was to keep the dialogue between the young people centre-stage, with the facilitating adults in the research team only interjecting in their group discussion to stimulate questioning, or suggest where the young people might need to make a collective decision over how to proceed. Throughout the process, observational data were recorded to document the decisions made, including associated dialogue (excerpts of which are included in this article). The fast-flowing nature of this dialogue required one member of the research team to remain in primarily passive observational mode to enable detailed note-taking and also offer a perspective on how decisions were reached and by whom. Later that day, such notes could be reflected upon and compared with the impressions and interpretations of the adult facilitator who was immersed in the flow of the action and facilitation of the group work.

Inclusion project overview

The inclusion project gained valuable insights into younger children's (four to five years) perceived, multi-faceted notions of inclusion (Shaw *et al.* 2021). Following a four-week period, during which the researcher adopted ethnographic ways of working, the children were invited to share their thoughts utilising the visual methodological tools of photo-elicitation via a diamond ranking exercise (Rockett and Percival 2002) and drawings. The tools were selected to enable the voices of a group of children, under-represented and marginalized within research in inclusive education, to come to the fore, thus

challenging the constant theme of powerlessness and exclusion of this group (Messiou 2006). Photographs and drawings were selected as an instrument to evoke deeper responses, thoughts, feelings and memories from the children (Collier 1957, Dockett and Perry 2005), rather than tools which rely on more traditional modes of communication.

In the following sections, we flesh out our proposed heuristic framework by embedding examples of younger children and young people's voices through the above-mentioned modes of involvement: '*organic and unbridled*', '*organic yet enabled*' and '*enabled and shaping*'. We proffer the framework as an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to deliberate over how they might apply the three modes to facilitate decision-making, reflection and ongoing analysis of complex processes within PR. We adopt pseudonyms throughout (younger children – C1, C2 ...; young people – YP1, YP2 ...; facilitating adult – FA) to depict the participants' engagement with PR, whilst ensuring their anonymity.

Organic and unbridled (predominantly 'stepping out')

Conceiving of choreography as having organic qualities recognizes the exploratory nature of dance that allows for spontaneity, or new paths to grow as different minds meet or connect. Revealing our commitment to participatory principles, we provided times for the young participants to express themselves in previously unforeseen ways, or to influence the project's direction. For example, from commencement of the plastics project, we adopted a predominantly 'stepping-out' approach, providing the young people with opportunities to explore their ideas and questions about plastics-waste by spontaneous means, interact with their peers in ways they considered most natural or comfortable, and allow the project to develop in a manner that was organic and unbridled.

Reassurance that this approach enabled the young people to take further control of the process is revealed in a construct described as 'kids' talk', which we infer to mean their own young-person-to-young-person language.

- YP1: Mine looks creepy
- YP5: They're really big eyes (laughs)
- YP3: Omygod those eyes are weird! (laughs) ha ha ... we're talking like kids [addressing adults]
... just get used to it

We consider instances such as these to be an active management of participation, with the young people not merely waiting for us to pass them the baton of power; rather than a power struggle, this was about allowing time for relationships to develop.

An example of 'stepping-out' in the inclusion project indicates the importance of leaving space for younger children to share a piece of their subjective worlds and comment on their preferences in unique ways. During a group discussion, one child indicated that she did not feel included in the whole-class teaching (which occurred on the carpet), but did not reveal why. At a later date, whilst playing on the carpet during an everyday activity that did not form part of the defined data-collection process, she provided insight into her potential reasoning.

- FA: Why don't you feel included when you're playing with tractors on the carpet?
- C2: it just makes me feel like ... it makes it like it hurts my legs. And 'cause when it hurts my legs it just gets my legs all ... Like it hurts my knees when I crawl so fast, 'cause it's so spiky!

This approach creates possibilities to contemplate the reality of the daily lives of individuals and collective participants in different dimensions and interactions, whilst remaining mindful of the principles of listening, accessing perspectives and understanding in PR. The success of the inclusion project lay in part with the moments when we 'stepped-out' of the defined data-collection processes; this enabled the emergence of the autonomous nature of watching, listening, reflecting and engaging in conversation to gain a degree of insight into the child's subjectivity (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008) away from the prescribed activities of more adult-designed methods.

These examples illustrate how the notion of ‘stepping-out’ can potentially enable the researcher or practitioner to perceive the act as a conscious decision that facilitates the empowerment of younger children or young people, rather than one that might previously have been conceived of as a passive deed of absence, or failure to remain focused on the research aim.

Organic yet enabling (a recursive ‘stepping in and out’)

In alignment with Kipling Brown’s (2014) notion of creative dance that draws on the dancers’ imagination and allows them to create their own movement and style, which is guided by the choreographer, we now explore ‘organic yet enabling’. We provide examples from the plastics project where our intervention enabled the young people to achieve their collective aims by ‘stepping-in’ and ‘stepping-out’, along with reflections on the dilemmas over the degree of directiveness adults should offer within PR, and its implications for children’s spontaneity, motivation and voice. The recursive manner by which we ‘stepped-in’ and ‘stepped-out’ represents an important part of the PR process.

Examples of ‘stepping-out’ have already been explored; nonetheless, there were instances when nimble footwork was required to keep the young people’s ideas centre-stage, and we considered the need to ‘step-in’, momentarily, to maintain the momentum of the project. Initially, we intended the possibilities presented by technology (e.g. demonstrating the animation software) to be secondary to the young people’s ideas and imagery about plastics-waste in their locality. However, rather than affording them freedom to lead the project in whichever direction they chose, this approach eventually led to slumps in their energy and their ideas to falter.

Reflecting on our input, it appeared our ‘stepping-out’ and subsequent attempt to revive the young people’s energy by calling on them to draw ‘anything that popped into their heads’ exemplified one of the challenges presented by PR. The suggestion was perhaps akin to presenting them with a daunting blank sheet of paper and indicative of the stalling of mutual understanding, or knowing what one another wants. Thus, we ‘stepped-in’, giving the young people the guidance that they requested, namely, examples of what they might draw. However, this resulted in their reverting to a more passive mode of engagement, asking ‘is this ok?’, or ‘can I ...?’, reflecting more formal educational discourses and conventions at odds with PR. Recalling the heuristic framework at this point would have enabled us to call to mind the visual dance imagery of the choreographer ‘stepping-in’ in order to consider whether our input was supporting and guiding the young people. Instead, we were more concerned at the time with the thorny issue of how much we might have been in danger of leading the young people through our responses. Nonetheless, without ‘stepping-in’ the young people’s faltering may ultimately have resulted in a further dwindling commitment to the emergent aims that they had developed and articulated over several sessions.

Enabled and shaping (‘stepping on toes’)

We have, thus far, provided instances of where we ‘stepped-in’ and ‘stepped-out’ of the processes; nonetheless, there were occasions where we ‘stepped-on-the-toes’ of the young participants in our desire to maintain focus on the end product, such as the animation (plastics project); project’s aims (inclusion project). One such example of ‘stepping-on-toes’ comes from a group interview in the inclusion project. In an attempt to understand the perceptions of a range of younger children, photographs of pedagogical activities (i.e. outdoor learning; school visit; whole class; group activities) were used as provocations.

- FA: C3 has chosen the visit to the fire station. C4, why do you feel most included in this learning?
 C3: I can go inside a fire station.
 FA: C4, when we went to the fire station, what were you able to do?
 C3: I got flowers on my shoes.

FA: Yes C3, but we're not talking about this right now.

As might be expected with young children, this example depicts C3 interrupting C4 to chat about matters of direct interest to them (new shoes), instead of engaging in conversations about the images presented by the researcher. Rather than talking to C3 about her shoes, which may have eventually led to thoughts relating to inclusion, the pressures of time and maintaining the group's focus led to the researcher potentially 'stepping-on-toes' to revert their attention to the project's aim.

A closing example from the plastics project further supports the notion that at times we might be 'stepping-on-toes' and interrupting the flow of their work. In the early stages, the young people were enthusiastic about how their rap, which would accompany their digitized animation, might develop. One, in particular, performed her ideas to the group; however, she seemed more focused on the rap's structure and rhyme, rather than how it resonated with the issue of plastics-waste. Similarly, two further young people became captivated by the playfulness associated with rhyme. At this juncture, the facilitating adults were focused on the animation itself and, cognisant of the challenge this was going to present in creating a pictorial scene coherent with the animation's visual narrative, they 'stepped-on-the-toes' of the young people, in a conscious intervention to guide their ideas towards a more workable, pragmatic resolution,

FA: What do you think the next step could be anyone want to share their lyrics for their litter character?

YP1: Ha ha - I'll go ... (rapping) My name is Red (litter character), I'm hanging on by a thread; I'm a straw from MacDoodles; been dragged from a car by a poodle.

FA: I think there's lots of scenes ... worlds to animate there ... it means making a picture of Macdoodles then y'know a poodle ...

YP2: Could Red be stolen by the Poodle ... y'know won't let you pull from its mouth ... takes Red into the woods where he meets the other litter characters?

FA: What about that thing we're often guilty of doing when you open the car door and your rubbish falls out that you could do in less frames?

Further reflections

We reflected that encouraging the young people in the plastics project to continually align their productivity and original aim sometimes ran contrary to a creative way of working, with its emphasis on emergence and the making of unexpected connections. Working towards, or designing, a tangible output (the digitized animation backed by a rap) required a much more linear way of working. However, the young people seemed to relish the creative, idea-generating phase, which resulted in divergence from their original aim to create an end-product for digital dissemination of their environmentally responsible message.

We were aware that our 'stepping on toes' (in an attempt to steer their ideas back into alignment with their original aims) could represent a juncture at which the decision-making and thus control of the process were taken out of the young people's hands. Consequently, to keep their ideas and young person-to-young person dialogue centre-stage, we encouraged them to select from a set of options that we presented to them for every single aspect of the design; for example, asking them to vote on which precise colours to use, showing what their selection would look like on a digital screen and encouraging subsequent discussion. Here, we were essentially showing them the impact of each decision on the way the product took shape in a deliberate attempt to position them as controllers of the product development phase. However, we noted that this focused phase, which involved editing, refining and deletion of previous ideas, was not as wholeheartedly embraced by the young people when compared to an earlier idea-generating stage, nor did it generate as much dialogue between the young people. We reflected that the young people's slight reticence to volunteer to take the lead in the editing process was perhaps because it may have been perceived

by them to involve decisions resulting, inadvertently, in the deletion of peers' earlier creative inputs. Thus, it would alter the informal dynamic of the group and its tacit ethos of openness to every members' inputs.

Whilst keen to support the young participants in our projects to recognize where they could play an instrumental role in realizing a collective aim, we would add a cautionary note regarding the potential for decision-fatigue: the limited reserve of stamina for decision-making can become drained, with participants' choices being made for passive reasons, such as wanting an issue resolved or being able to move onto something different (Vohs *et al.* 2008). It was an aspect we had perhaps not paid sufficient regard to at the time. Moreover, it relates to a wider question concerning the types of decision-making that are conducive to young participants' sense of ownership of project outcomes and whether involvement in each decision is necessary so that the control of the process does not slip back into the hands of facilitating adults.

Considerations for the application of the heuristic framework

We envisage our proposed heuristic framework to be used by facilitating adults: (a) in the preparation phases of the research in order to consider how each mode might speak to each planned phase; (b) in the moment, during the hands-on phase, to act as an aide memoire, or way of monitoring how cognisant the adult facilitator is of stepping in, out or on toes, and the potential impact on young participant voice; (c) in the post-activity phase, which might be prior to planning the next phase, to aid reflections on which mode was dominant and whether this was desired. The framework might thus enable fresh ways of thinking, when adult facilitators are caught in familiar patterns of response to the young participants, or when making adjustments in the moment.

The framework might be refined further, and perhaps rendered more widely applicable to those engaging in research under the umbrella of PR, through consideration of whether its three modes relate to different contexts. For instance, non-formal, youth work contexts may lean more towards 'organic and unbridled' and 'organic yet enabling' modes. Nonetheless, we do not proffer any mode as higher than another in terms of how it facilitates authentic participation; rather, we advocate that adult facilitators need to strike a balance between the modes. Further investigation could help identify whether there are modes which become prevalent during funded PR projects, which tend to emphasize a definitive output. Similarly, PR practice in schools may persistently veer towards certain modes, owing to their more structured environments.

We created a visual representation of our heuristic framework (see [Figure 1](#)) so that it can readily be called to mind by the facilitating adult, especially when in the flow.

Conclusion

This article has proffered an original heuristic framework to support adults in deciphering their role as facilitators in PR with children and young people. Our framework provides a timely new tool, responding to a call for greater clarity and support for the researcher mindful of the need to balance their involvement to keep the project on course, with giving young participants responsibility and room for expression, which has been articulated in recent literature problematising PR. Subsequently, we drew an analogy to the role of the choreographer, drawing on dance literature to offer a vision of the adult facilitator who may decide to 'step in' or 'out', or recognize when 'stepping on toes' might be unavoidable, after considering their potential impact on the young participants' voices. The three proffered modes within our framework, 'organic and unbridled', 'organic yet enabling' and 'enabled and shaping', denote nuanced positions that the adult facilitator (choreographer) may move between, which challenge the notion of ascending levels of participation on a ladder and pay greater justice to the messiness of PR. Our framework also makes more explicit the nuanced positions that adult facilitators might assume, and takes into account tensions in PR, which might be underestimated if relying on existing models. None of our modes are presented

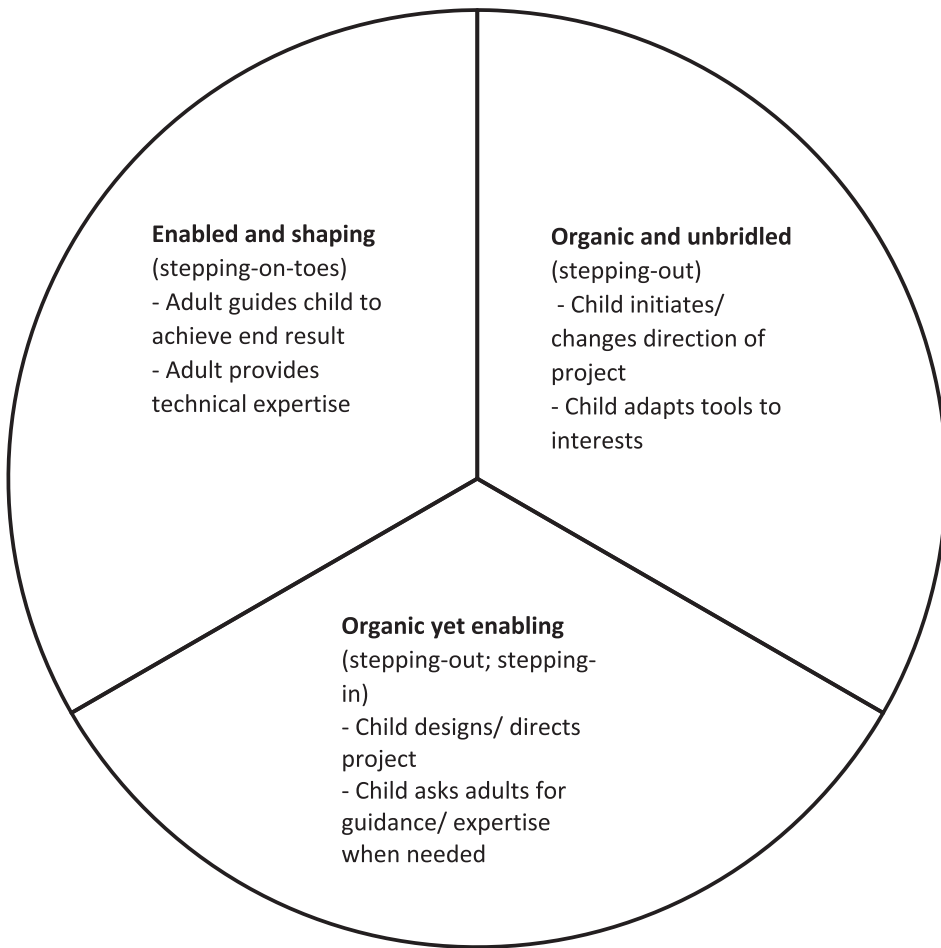


Figure 1. Heuristic framework.

hierarchically, as though one might be held up as ‘most participatory’ or ‘more participatory than another’; moreover, our framework affords flexibility and greater room for adjustment when responding to young participants.

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