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BRIEF REPORTS

Participatory Research (PR) Working With Adolescent Research Assistants in a Specialist School

Caroline L Daw[1]

[1] IOE - Psychology and Human Development, University College London

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The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) and a growing body of literature highlight the need to "unmute" the voices of children and young people (Alderson, 2008; Christensen & James, 2008; Kellett, 2010). For clarity, the terms "child" and "children" will be used throughout this introduction to represent all individuals under the age of 18. Within educational psychology practice, emphasis is placed on gathering the views of children and representing these views fairly. This brief report describes participatory research involving a small group of adolescent research assistants in the design, analysis, and dissemination phases of a larger research project. These research assistants attended a school for students with social, emotional, and mental health needs, and many had (or were in the process of being assessed for) an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Their feedback and recommendations for future researchers with regards to recruitment and participatory practices are of value to those within the educational psychology field and beyond.

Over the last 20 years, research exploring children's voices has called for researchers to do more than just ask for their views. Christensen and James (2008) suggested that "children are the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences" and will have a unique perspective on what is and is not important to them. They called for future researchers exploring the views of children to do more to include child researchers within the planning stages of research, enabling a shift in the power dynamic and allowing for the child's voice to speak through the whole research, rather than just in the results section. Some researchers suggest that this movement has stemmed from a variety of factors, including a greater recognition of children's agency (Christensen & James, 2008), an increased awareness of the rights of children (Kellett, 2010), and an interest in including the perspectives of service users in the research of provisions (Mcveety & Farren, 2019).

Thomas (2011) highlights some limitations of previous participatory research. Firstly, that the researcher does not give "real power" to children, and secondly that the research fails to include hard-to-reach children, including children who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs. Other researchers have questioned the contributions that "children's voices" actually play in research that is ultimately written by adults for an adult audience (Clark & Richards, 2017; Facca et al., 2020). Research also highlights the difficulties in working with children and adolescents in a research capacity, suggesting that "involvement of child researchers throws up unique and formidable challenges" (Kelly et al., 2023).

A recent systematic literature review (Bakhtiar et al., 2023) found 25 studies where children and adolescents (aged 15 years or younger) were recruited as part of the core research team. Of these studies, six were based in education fields, though none specifically looked at the special educational needs population. Where research has considered students with special educational needs, there appears to be a trend in recruiting older adolescents to engage in the research.

O'Connor et al. (2011) set out to engage young people in a pilot study aiming to explore the views of students with behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties (BESD) who had been excluded from school due to challenging behaviour. Three students aged 14–16 years attending an alternative provision participated in the pilot, attending "activity days" that incorporated a range of participatory activities such as ice-breaker games, group discussions, and life grid activities. Researchers met with participants again during the analysis phase of the research to discuss emerging themes from the pilot and ensure that the young people's experiences had been captured accurately. Students reported that they had been unaware of the BESD label being used to describe them, and reported to relate better to specific diagnostic terms, such as ADHD. These findings have been replicated more recently (Caslin, 2019; Sheffield & Morgan, 2017). O'Connor et al. (2011) concluded that the pilot study highlighted the importance of gathering views from "hard to reach" students, such as those with BESD, and by including these students within the analysis phase of the pilot, researchers were more confidently able to accurately report the voice of the child.

Bucking the trend for recruiting older students, Silverman (2012) conducted a STARs (Students as Researchers) project with primary school students from a specialist provision for social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH). The child researchers designed and conducted the research, then analyzed and disseminated findings on several topics about student's experiences of school. The research findings looked primarily at the process and the experiences of the child researchers, with the themes emerging from feedback from the STARs themselves. Using semi-structured interviews, Silverman received positive feedback about the project and key themes included views towards the project, development of skills, perceived value of the project, and pupil competence.

Participation is highly relevant to the field of educational psychology, as well as the broader field of education more generally. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), which introduced Education Health and Care Plans (hereafter referred to as EHCPs), states, "local authorities must ensure that children, their parents, and young people are involved in discussions and decisions about their individual support and about local provision." As such, it seems logical that research into children's experiences of school, and specifically the experiences of obtaining and maintaining an EHCP should be explored through a participatory process. Existing research in this area has considered how the voices of children and young people are sought during the EHCP experience (Sharma, 2021), or during more general educational psychology

involvement (Harding & Atkinson, 2009). However, to date no published research has recruited child or adolescent research assistants to support the designing or analysis of research regarding this topic.

Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) consider how the articles surrounding participatory research typically focus on the why, but not always on the how, and call for "explicit descriptions" of the process in order to facilitate implementation and impact. Using the framework suggested by Vaughn and Jacquez (2020), this brief report will outline how a piece of participatory research was conducted within a broader study looking at student's experiences of receiving an EHCP. A full account of the broader study is provided in Daw (2020).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University Data Protection Office in March 2019, following approval from research supervisors. Further ethical approval was granted by the Research and Development team within the Local Authority participating in this research. Information and consent forms were sent to the parents of the adolescent research assistants, as well as the young people themselves, to explain their role in the research and ascertain their consent to take part. Separate consent was also sought from the parents and participants involved in the research itself. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research and no disclosures were made that led to safeguarding concerns. Data was stored anonymously and securely and destroyed at the end of the project.

Research Approach

This research recruited adolescents with identified special educational needs (SEN) who were being educated in a SEN specialist provision for students with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs. The research assistants met the same inclusion criteria as the participants recruited for the study but attended a different school. The broader research looked at students' lived experiences of the EHCP process, from school before receiving a plan, through assessment, and then to the issuing of the plan (and potential subsequent school move). Participants involved in the broader research initially completed an online questionnaire about their involvement in the EHCP application and assessment process, and were then invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Those who indicated an interest in the interview were contacted and interviews took place at their school.

The research assistants were recruited based on their personal perspectives on the process, with the hope they would work with the adult researcher to shape the project into something that meaningfully highlighted the voices of students with SEMH needs. Their primary responsibilities were related to the piloting of the questionnaire, the designing of a semi-structured interview schedule, the analysis of the interview transcripts, and the development of a presentation designed to disseminate findings.

Partner

In order to conduct this participatory research, I recognised the presence of two main gatekeepers — the school and parents — and followed suggestions from previous researchers (Dentith et al., 2012; Skelton, 2008) with regards to my approach. Following receipt of ethical approval, a specialist secondary school was contacted to gauge interest in participating in the research. Participatory research designed to take place within schools often faces challenges where school staff refuse access to the researchers (Dentith et al., 2012), and can require "insiders" to help them overcome this. For this project, the school's link Educational Psychologist supported the initial introduction to the school. Flyers advertising the role of adolescent research assistant were distributed to all students, and those who were interested were asked to inform staff so that parental consent forms could be sent home.

In total, four students expressed interest the project. They were all female, reflecting the predominantly female school cohort at the time, and were ages 13–16. They had all attended the school for at least six months and two had EHCPs in place. One student dropped out of the study after she finished her exams, and therefore only attended one meeting, with the remaining meetings held with three research assistants. No incentives were offered to the adolescent research assistants for participation, and there was no goal number of research assistants to recruit. Letters of involvement were sent to each student at the end of the project, detailing their involvement and skills learned. The aim of these letters was to provide a record of contribution to research which could form part of a growing CV or college application.

During the research, I remained conscious that my access to the research assistants was through the school, and that the Interim Headteacher had the power to restrict access or to end the project if the school felt it was taking up too much time. To manage the arrangement, I contacted the Interim Headteacher regularly, providing updates on the research and plans for what would take place in the next meeting with the research assistants. Meetings were timetabled in consultation with the research assistants and school staff to reduce disruption to academic studies. These connections also enabled opportunities for "check-ins" regarding the research assistants, considering their well-being and any potential impact their involvement in the project may be having.

The first meeting aimed to build rapport as a team and discuss their potential role within this research. I (the lead adult researcher) brought snacks to the meeting and ideas about possible ice-breaker games to get to know each other. Learning from Silverman (2012), I was keen to participate as much as possible so I could build a relationship with the research assistants alongside them building relationships with each other. The games played in the first meeting included juggling and two truths/one lie. As these activities were popular, I continued to bring snacks and games to each meeting. This enabled further development of rapport throughout the project and provided space for the adolescent research assistants to interact with me on an informal level.

Table 1. Phases of Adolescent Research Assistant meetings

Phase	Meeting Number	Function/Main aims
Design June-July 2019	1	Introduce research and design scope
	2	Pilot questionnaire
	3	Create interview schedule
Analysis September 2019 – January 2020	4	Thematic Analysis training
	5	Thematic Analysis 1 (Transcript 1)
	6	Thematic Analysis 2 (Transcript 2)
Dissemination	7 – February 2020	Confirm thematic map, discuss abstract and complete survey
	8 – September 2020	Feedback and discuss dissemination of research

Games such as Uno, Jenga, and cards were played regularly, often at the end of the meeting. O'Connor et al. (2011) suggest that good practice is the use of ice-breaker games to build rapport between the adult researcher and the child and young person researchers. Based on feedback from the adolescent researchers involved in this project, I suggest that games should be used throughout the project to develop and maintain positive and strong relationships within the research team.

I also made explicit attempts to present myself as a "different kind of adult" (Corsaro & Molinari, 2017). These included the use of first names in discussions, dressing in casual clothes, the use of games throughout, the bringing of snacks, the room layout, and seating plan. I feel that these changes helped me develop a status as a "less powerful adult."

The plan was to meet eight times, with the final meeting arranged to design a presentation for disseminating the research. Each meeting took place within a classroom environment, during school hours. The research assistants were given permission to miss a lesson in order to attend each meeting. One member of school staff attended each meeting, providing a familiar face for the students, and supporting with emotional containment if needed. Due to COVID-19, the final meeting was postponed, and instead provided a space for dissemination discussions, feedback, and goodbyes. Table 1 outlines the phases, functions, and timescales for each research meeting.

Design

Prior to research assistant involvement, an agreement had been reached that the project would use a questionnaire and a follow-up interview, with a broad focus area on school experiences of students with EHCPs. However, the role of the research assistants during the design phase remained substantial.

Questionnaire

The research assistants engaged in a group discussion about the possible experiences of students with EHCPs, while I (lead adult researcher) created a spider diagram of their discussion points. My involvement in the discussion was limited to asking clarifying questions, such as "what do you mean by confidence in accessing support systems?" or giving information about the participant group (secondary school age). Discussing how the questionnaire

should be sent to participants (online vs. on paper), the research assistants suggested that online would be better as it was more accessible and told me that students would be used to completing questionnaires online.

Interview Schedule

Following the pilot study and the approval of the questionnaire, the research assistants were asked to design an interview schedule that could be used for the follow-up interviews. They consulted the spider diagrams completed in earlier meetings and discussed topics that needed further exploration. They also received brief training on semi-structured interviews and how to write an interview schedule. The research assistants wrote nine questions alongside prompts for use during the interview to add clarity or gather further information. They also detailed starter and end activities, and suggested games I could bring as ice-breakers. The final semi-structured interview guidance can be found in the appendix.

Research Questions

The research questions for the project were generated through reflection discussions with the research assistants during the design process, based on their interest in the topic and their desire to share knowledge with school leaders and the wider education profession. I took the lead in writing the final research questions based on these reflections.

Data Collection

Unfortunately, none of the research assistants were involved in the collection of the data, due to the logistical complexities of conducting research across a number of different schools. This was not in line with good practice guidance suggesting that using adolescent researchers (or service users) at all levels of research, including data collection, leads to greater ownership of the findings and richer responses from participants (Tait & Lester, 2005).

Analysis

Nind (2011) proposes that for participatory data analysis to be effective, the child researchers should take on the role of "sense-maker," with the adult researcher taking the role of "trainer and scaffolder." Previous researchers (Lushey & Munro, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2011) have demonstrated good practice in this area, training children in thematic analysis so that they could be involved in the coding of interview transcripts and the later identification of key findings.

Training on Thematic Analysis

To prepare for the training, I created an easy-read guide on Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explain what a theme was and to guide the research assistants through the six phases. All the research assistants attended the training and engaged well in the activity. Independently, we each read an anonymized interview extract and highlighted interesting or recurring phrases. We then each discussed something that we had highlighted, noticing instances of agreement or disagreement. I made notes on the discussion as well as the

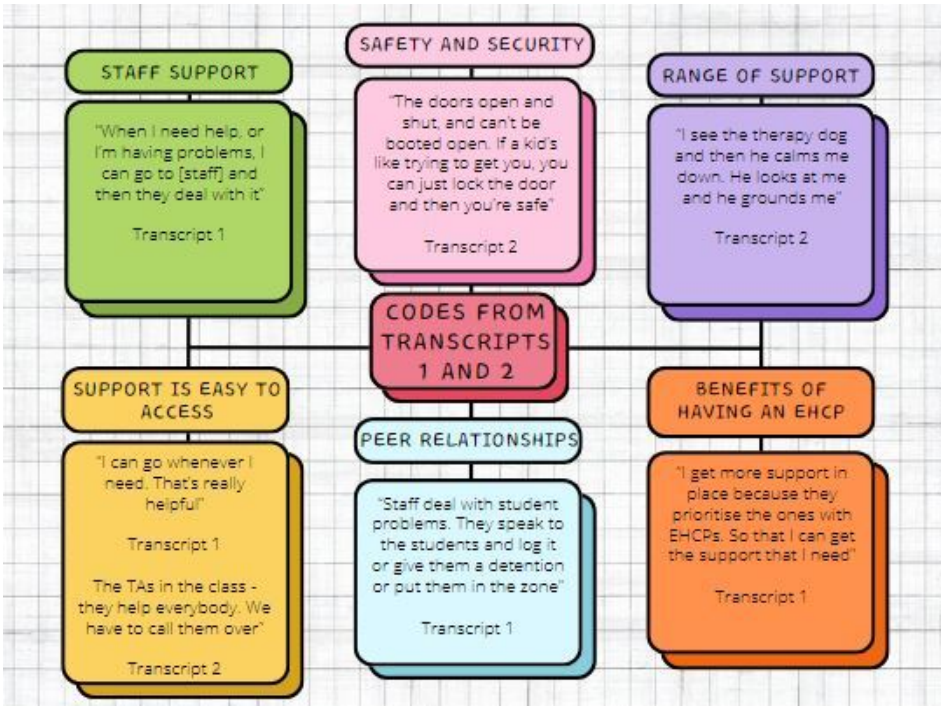

Figure 1. Graphic showing some of the codes and themes generated from Transcripts 1 and 2

codes that had been generated. Towards the end of the training, we discussed the agreed codes and defined our themes, before re-reading the extract to check that the themes reflected the content.

Analysis of the research data

The analysis of two anonymized transcripts was completed over two sessions, enabling careful consideration of each transcript without feeling rushed to read two interviews within the session. These two transcripts were chosen from a total of eight as they had been completed and transcribed in advance of the research assistant analysis phase meetings. Care was taken to ensure that transcripts did not include any identifying information about the participants or the school(s) they attended.

Transcripts

The first transcript analyzed was from a Year 9 student at a mainstream school. The four of us independently read through the anonymized transcript and highlighted short phrases that were interesting or recurring. As we had done during the training, we then each took turns discussing a phrase that we had highlighted, explaining why we had done so. A total of 21 codes were generated and grouped into seven themes. Figure 1 shows the themes generated from these transcripts, as well as examples of the codes identified. It is worth noting that whilst most of the codes were generated independently, some came from the discussion of the transcript. Where disagreement occurred regarding the inclusion of a code, all variations of the code were included. All of the codes were generated inductively (i.e. from the transcript) rather than as a result of knowledge about findings from the literature.

The second transcript analyzed was that of a Year 8 student at a specialist school, and 19 codes were generated, forming eight themes. Again, all the codes were generated inductively, and the codes and themes arising from Transcript 1 were not discussed during the analysis of Transcript 2. This was to enable inductive decision-making and avoid the risk of making links and patterns to broader themes too early in the analysis process. The reliability calculation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to measure the reliability of the thematic analysis. The level of agreement for the first and second transcripts were 83.96% and 85.96% respectively, both for 95% of the codes. These levels reached the "sufficient agreement" threshold for multiple coders (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Disseminate

After defining and naming all of the themes, I drafted a thematic map which I presented to the research assistants during Meeting 7. This enabled the research assistants to provide feedback. Unfortunately, due to low attendance in Session 7, the discussion around the thematic map was minimal. The secondary purpose of the meeting was to prepare aspects of a research presentation for the university. A further meeting to complete this was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that I alone created the final presentation.

Act

This project contributed to a wider piece of doctoral research, and as such, the power in acting upon the findings from the participatory research was minimal. However, a survey was conducted with the research assistants to examine their experience of the process. Findings from the survey indicated positive attitudes towards the project, with research assistants highlighting their role in providing a unique perspective and in helping the adult researcher. Research assistants also discussed the research skills acquired during the project, and provided insight into how adult researchers could recruit adolescent research assistants in the future. These themes reflect findings from Silverman (2012), who also found that child researchers valued their newly developed research skills, and from the systematic literature review (Bakhtiar et al., 2023) that summarized the key benefits of child and adolescent researcher's engagement included a personal sense of empowerment, the development of research skills, and a desire to pursue future educational opportunities.

The adolescent research assistants provided recommendations for future researchers in relation to recruitment of research assistants, and participatory practices. Specifically, they talked about the types of young people who may be interested in taking on the role of research assistant (someone interested in psychology or in future studies where there is a research element) and highlighted the need to be recruit cautiously to reduce the potential for individuals dropping out. In relation to participatory practices, the feedback showed recognition towards some of the steps I had taken to present myself as a "different kind of adult," and the ways in which I listened to their opinions and

used their views to shape the research. One of the main challenges highlighted through much of the literature on working with child researchers is the disparity of power and status between the adults and the children (Corsaro & Molinari, 2017; Kellett, 2010; Kirk, 2007; Roberts, 2017). As such, it was nice to see that my actions to redress power imbalance appeared to be received positively by the research assistants.

Conclusion

This research set out to provide an example of participatory methodology and to explore how the adolescent research assistants experience participatory research. The purpose was to add to existing literature on the participation agenda, focusing on increasing the use of children researchers and co-researchers within academic research and on valuing children's perspectives (Christensen & James, 2008; Kellett, 2010; Mcveety & Farren, 2019).

There were limitations to the study — namely the decisions made prior to the recruitment of the adolescent research assistants hindering the freedom of the research assistants during the "Design" phase, and the lack of adolescent research assistant participation in the "Collection" phase of the study. As discussed by Coyne (2010), ethics procedures for social sciences are not yet truly reflective of the participation agenda and the notion that children and young people are able to make some informed choices about whether or not to participate in research. More needs to be done to address this in order to ensure true participation of children and young people at all levels of research.

This brief report reflects a model of participatory research that has worked somewhat successfully and could be replicated or built upon in the future. It has demonstrated that adolescents have an interest in engaging with research and can be supported to meaningfully participate in design, analysis, and dissemination phases of research. Working with adolescent research assistants highlighted their capacity to bring interesting and unique perspectives to research, especially as they represented the intended participant group. Their insight was invaluable, and I would recommend use of participatory methods in all research involving children and young people.

Thinking about how educational psychologists conduct research, I would advocate for the use of participatory methods in any future research looking at experiences of children and young people. Thomas (2017) argues that there are a number of different levels of participation that children and young people can hold in research, often depending on how involved they have been in the initiation of the research project themselves, with truly participatory research being initiated by the children and young people themselves (Fox, 2013). This current research, alongside the existing body of literature on participatory methods, demonstrates the positive impact this methodology has on the adult researcher(s), the children and young people participating, and the richness of data gathered. With a strong professional narrative of gathering and listening to the voices of children and young people, a natural step forwards would be to develop research practices that actively involve children and young people in all phases of research.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

Starting the Interview

- Introductions
- How are you? Conversation should be two-way
- How was your summer?

Optional ice-breaker games

- Uno
- Jenga
- Cards

1. **Could you first start by just telling me about what you think of school?** *(Do you like it/dislike it? Why?)*
2. **Do you get any learning support at school, as well as for things outside of learning?**

   a. **If yes, what is that support and is it easy to access?**

   b. **If no, can you think of any support that could be helpful?**
3. **Do you know of any other support that is available at your school?**
4. **Do you feel emotionally safe at school?** *(comfortable, able to express yourself, not bullied/teased)*
5. **How did you find the move from your old school to your new school? ***

   a. **Was there any support to help you settle in?**

   b. **How involved were you in the decision-making process?**
6. **If there was something in school that was bothering you, are there people you could talk to about it?** *(Has this ever happened to you or someone you know?)*
7. **Thinking about your relationships with other students, have there been any issues and, if so, were they resolved?** *(How?)*
8. **Does the school have any methods for helping students if they are feeling isolated?**
9. **Finally, do you have any advice or key tips for anyone who has recently received an EHCP?**

* Only ask this question if they have moved schools since receiving the EHCP

Ending the Interview

- How did you find this whole experience of the interview and the questionnaire?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?