

# Research Subjects, Participants or Co-researchers? Extending the Involvement of Students in Art and Design Research

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## Abstract

Art education has a range of purposes. Art is said to support students to explore, interpret, ask critical questions, communicate and realise ideas, experiment, take risks, collaborate, tell stories and/or engage in social and political actions. In this paper, we consider whether educational researchers have the same capacious view of students' potential and capacities for involvement. We bring the results of a Rapid Evidence Review (RER) of the benefits of arts education into conversation with the literatures on student voice and participation. We outline the ways in which student voice and participation are discussed, then move to the results of the RER. We conclude with a discussion of the opportunities for art education researchers to develop research practices that are inclusive of students.

## Keywords

agency, empowerment, methodology, participation, students, voice

Arts educators generally see each student as someone capable of becoming/being an artist (Hay 2023). This imagined artist school student has agency, is able to make choices and decisions, and has perspectives that are important and worthy of recognition. The imagined art student has life experiences, opinions and funds of knowledge which are the basis of their responses to artworks and the foundation on which their own art practice can be built. This artist-student is also quite often seen as capable of challenging the status quo and unjust power relations (Addison & Burgess 2020).

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Art teachers are acutely aware that their ideal imagined student is often different from the students imagined by teachers in other disciplines—their art student has a distinctive degree of autonomy and exercises critical self-evaluation. Art teachers thus organise the school art curriculum to support the development of independent inquiry through ever more ambitious projects; tasks and texts become increasingly complex and challenging, works are made for a variety of audiences, and a rich web of interactions is developed with artists and their worlds (Thomson & Hall 2023). Art teachers know that their subject is both a way of knowing and being, as well as providing knowledge and skills in, for and about practice (Hetland *et al.* 2007). The dialogue-based relationships and person-focused conversations that art teachers develop with students can be seen as simply being more relaxed and friendly but are often seen by students as more adult and more trusting (Thomson & Hall 2021). But these teacher-student connections and conversations are profoundly pedagogical, integral to the diagnosis of areas of development, negotiation of topics and activities and the scaffolding of technical growth and critical capacities.

Of course art education is sometimes not this, it is not always inclusive, or empowering (Penketh 2016). But the imaginary of students as experts in their own lives and as persons with agency and the capacities and rights to have opinions and make interpretations underpins much of what is written about school art pedagogies (Hickey-Moody 2012; Atkinson 2017). And art education researchers often take this view as a starting point for their investigations of art practices and for their arguments about what art education ought to be and do.

We are struck by the similarity between the imaginary of the art student at school as agentic, critical and capable and the literature on student voice and participation, as we now explain. We, first of all, address student participation practices and methodological framings. This is a somewhat lengthy elaboration as we see one of the contributions of the paper as being the joining of this body of research with that of art education. We then move to our own empirical study which looks at the ways in which student involvement in art education has been researched. We conclude by suggesting that there is an exciting opportunity for arts researchers to bring what they know about arts pedagogies to the development of new research approaches which prioritise and/or involve children and young people as co-researchers.

## Student voice and participation in schools and research

Student voice seeks to bring previously marginalised perspectives to the forefront of institutional practices. Student participation aims to position students as more than objects of pedagogical and researcher activity.

The development of student voice and participation strategies in education has occurred in schools and research. Within the teaching profession, educators have slowly developed avenues through which children and young people can have a say in matters that concern them—children and young people are given positions on school committees and governing bodies, student representative bodies are formed and student teams take action to change their schools and communities (Holdsworth 2000; Thomson 2007). Researchers were variously involved in their developments, as evaluators, critical friends and partners. Researchers often directed their energies to support the systematic development of a body of

empirical knowledge about students' participation in schools, as well as developing helpful theoretical perspectives. They also focused on the position of students within research projects—were students the subjects of research or something more agentic?

## Key methodological perspectives include

### The ladder of participation

Roger Hart's 'ladder of participation' (1992) showed a moral hierarchy of the ways in which children and young people were viewed and involved in projects—the ladder went from students as objects of activity, through students being consulted, to students as partners and finally students as directors of action. This hierarchy of participation was later applied to the involvement of students in research.

### Critical questions

Michael Fielding developed questions that might be asked of research projects and pedagogies alike. Fielding was concerned by the de-coupling of ethical purposes from discussions of processes, and saw the potential for the instrumentalisation of students' voices and agency, for the redirection of youthful energies to legitimate a rapidly narrowing English education system, where test and exam scores matter over more wholistic and socially just, human-centred approaches to schooling (2001a, 2001b, 2006). Fielding proposed questions that might be asked of any student participation project including research—who is speaking and who is not? what is allowed to be spoken about and what is not? who is listening and who is not? what happens as a result? and in whose interests are these results? (2004).

### The 7 Ps framework

The 7Ps framework (Cahill & Dadvand 2018) addresses the dangers of separating means and ends and asks practitioners and researchers alike to attend to purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place and youth participation in programmes. The 7Ps drew on feminist post-structural and critical theory, youth studies and citizenship research and were located in an Asia-Pacific development context, perhaps going some way to address Hart's concern about the Eurocentrism of his ladder.

### Rights-based models

Working with a rights perspective, Dana Mitra (2008) proposed that adult researchers ask who was being heard, who is collaborating with adults and what is done about building capacity for leadership. Lundy's (2007) children's rights-based model proposes researchers include a reflexive examination of the combination of space, voice, audience and influence afforded in research with students.

### 'Voiced research'

In feminist research practice, research which creates a space for hitherto unheard perspectives to enter the public realm (Smith 1987; Fine 1992) is generally understood as 'voiced'. Drawing from this tradition, Smyth & Hattam (2001) argued that voiced research working with young people was different from tokenistic, decorative or consultative research:

... because of its epistemological commitment to a more democratised research agenda ... (it) is a way of providing a genuine space within which young people are able to reveal what is real for them... This means that research questions can only really emerge out of 'purposeful conversations' (Burgess 1988; see also Burgess 1982, 1984), rather than interviews (whether structured or unstructured). (Smyth & Hattam 2001, pp. 407–408)

The notion of 'voice' and 'voiced' can be problematic. Focussing on the medium and process can shift the emphasis away from what is being spoken about, and what needs to happen after the 'speaking'. Aware of these issues, the shift that Smyth and Hattam proposed was more than simply 'voice'—it included space created by the researcher, purpose, ethical conduct and a normative Habermas (1987) view of dialogic reciprocity. Smyth and Hattam recommended considerable researcher reflexivity throughout a research project, including post-project publications and presentations.

### Student standpoint theory

Standpoint theory is a political position for speaking back to power (Foley 2002). While standpoint theory is critiqued for presupposing that marginalised groups share a universal position, homogenous experiences and common interests (Harding 1993), a post-critical standpoint methodology which recognised diversity and power imbalances would: address issues of importance to students and thus be in the interests of students; work with students' subjugated knowledge about the ways in which the school worked; allow marginalised perspectives and voices to come centre stage; use students' subjectivities and experiences to develop approaches, tools, representations and validities; interrupt power relations in schools, including, but not confined to those which are age-related; be geared to making a difference (Thomson & Gunter 2007).

### Students as researchers

Brasof & Levitan (2022) propose a four-part framework for research that either prioritises students' views, works with them as co-researchers or has students as designers of research, namely: Reflexivity about the researchers' conceptions of youth and the influence of the researchers' own childhoods and schooling experiences on their interpretation of students' voices; An explicit conception of intersubjectivity with younger people whose knowledge, identities and self-conceptions are rapidly developing; considerations of the relationships and power-dynamics between youth and adult researchers and selection of strategies congruent with students' contexts, cultures, experiences, perspectives and knowledge that researchers are seeking to access/understand.

### Little publics

Hickey-Moody has extended her theorisation of 'little publics' formed through youth arts activities (2015), to arts-based methods for work with young people (Hickey-Moody *et al.* 2021). Drawing on the notion of 'art brut'-outsider art-she developed a range of arts-based approaches for making data with children, rather than seeking to extract data preformulated by the adult researcher. She and colleagues asked young people to explore experiences of faith using, for example,

sculpture, painting, multimedia constructions and installations as the media for expression.

All of these emerging methodological approaches might, we suggest, and expand on later in the paper, be of interest to researchers in art education.

But perhaps they are already used? We turn now to our Rapid Evidence Review to get a snapshot of the ways in which art education researchers approach students.

## The rapid evidence review

Beginning in mid-December 2020, we conducted a three-month Rapid Evidence Review (RER) of ACD education research published in the previous 20 years. Due to the limitations of budget, time and Covid, we primarily used relevant English language journals sourced from our online university library catalogue as well as Google Scholar and journal publisher websites.<sup>1</sup> We included research that asserted the benefits of ACD education for children and young people. We scanned the papers to identify the types of benefits, the types of research, the evidence produced and the processes by which the evidence was produced. 'Think pieces' and state-of-the-field discussions were included; research that covered the ACD education of teachers, adults and communities, arts schools and other areas was excluded. Of the 463 located titles sourced, well over a third (173) concerned research conducted in the USA and around a quarter (121) in the UK. Australia (25), Canada (13) and Finland (9) were the next three biggest contributors.

The RER was sifted to select papers that focussed on aspects of student experience, participation and voice. While student voice and agency were clearly the subject of many papers in the RER (79 out of 463, 17 per cent), we located 79 papers that included students:

- Selecting an in-class topic or activity.
- Having 'control of their own learning' and 'curricular freedom'.
- Being involved in projects rooted in citizenship, democracy, advocacy and activism.
- Administrating a school art space such as Room 13.<sup>2</sup>

Within this selected corpus, 58 papers directly addressed students' agency and 25 papers directly addressed students' voice, defined here as a combination of citizenship, political awareness, 'voice' and empowerment research (see Tables 1 and 2). The most common types of empirical research designs, accounting collectively for nearly half of the overall papers, were case studies/case reports, mixed methods and action research.

**TABLE 1** Papers addressing students' agency: Type of study

Type of study	Case report	Mixed Methods	Action Research	(Auto) Ethnography	Case control	Interview based	Survey based
Overall	15	14	14	8	2	2	1
UK	4	5	2	2	—	—	—

**TABLE 2** Papers addressing students' voice: Type of study

Type of study	Case report	Mixed method	Action research	(Auto) Ethnography	Think piece
Overall	7	5	6	4	1
UK	—	1	—	—	—

We analysed the combined 79 papers for the types of student participation presented in the study and how students' voices were positioned. We recognise that the taxonomical sorting of student voice research is both a fluid and contested process and other researchers may come to different conclusions than we do. Research is always a matter of selection and interpretation no matter how scientised it may appear. With this caveat in mind, we offer the following analysis of the corpus focusing on location, scale, details of the students in the studies, how the research on or with students is discussed and how the students are positioned in the research.

### Location

Research from the USA comprised well over half of these papers; just under a fifth were from the UK. The remaining quarter were from other countries. Of these, Australia was the next most specified location. The remainder were from Canada, Spain, Denmark, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Namibia, Singapore and Sweden or were global in their focus. In line with the overall RER corpus, the majority of the student voice/participation/experience research involved either action research, case reports and/or mixed methods.

### Scale

Most of the research projects were small-scale; case studies of one class or school, often over the course of a single project, term or school year. The vast majority of these papers were either written by or focussed on a single teacher-researcher in their own classroom or school conducting a project usually over one term, semester or year, but occasionally over a single session. This was particularly the case for the UK studies with well over 80 per cent of the papers focussed on small-scale research. The few large-scale studies, mainly evaluations of programmes across a number of schools, were often mixed-methods and featured a combination of students' responses from questionnaires and/or focus groups (e.g. Marcus & Trustram 2009; Eglinton *et al.* 2017).

### How students appeared in the research

While some of the papers included examples of students' artwork (e.g. Hawkins 2002; Roth 2017), verbatim quotations from students (e.g. Russell-Bowie 2009; Traff-Prats 2009) and dialogue between students, and between students and staff and/or researcher, (Ivashkevich 2009; Kukkonen & Chang-Kredl 2018), it was sometimes hard to ascertain who the students were in terms of age, their programme of study or arts project and how many were involved.

Only a handful of papers reflected on the inherent problems of representation and interpretation in research that focused on students' experiences, learnings, views and interpretations or explored alternatives to researcher-led interviews and

artefact analysis. Alternative approaches included the use of non-speech methods such as scrapbooks (Anning & Ring 2004) and photographs (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler 1998). Most frequently, there was no or little exploration of researcher-student power relations nor of the ways in which researchers' own positionality and views were implicated in the research.

An important aspect of our analysis of the corpus was to read the methods sections of papers to ascertain the nature of the activity (the design, the collection and utilisation of data), as well as who, how, where and why it is conducted. While a number of taxonomies of students have been proposed (as reported earlier), for this paper, we have adopted the following three categories: (1) responding (students' voices and views being elicited and reported,  $n = 63$ ), (2) participating (collaborating with adults, sometimes co-constructing the research,  $n = 13$ ) and (3) evaluating (offering interpretations and critical analysis,  $n = 3$ ). We emphasise that this is not a hierarchy and different projects create and demand different kinds of research relationships.

## Responding

Students become respondents when researchers seek out their views, often about an existing programme or an initiative. Most of the papers ( $n = 63$ ) in the corpus sought to gauge the opinions of students, and/or to secure students' approval on nascent ideas or an already-planned activity, and, less often, to canvas opinions on potential changes to aspects of school life. Papers that sought students as respondents often aspired to a 'voiced' approach.

Much of the data was produced either through questionnaires or focus group discussions where a teacher and/or researcher recorded and made notes. Sometimes the students appeared to be represented by either volunteer or appointed student spokespeople. The basis for their selection was often unclear. The degree to which the diversity of the student body is represented and reflected by spokespeople will always be limited. The outcomes may also be unexpected. This was often not explicitly recognised in the papers; students' words were most often taken as representative, fixed and 'authentic'.

Sometimes students' artefacts were used to elicit experiences and opinions. In one study, students' artworks were used as stimuli for conversations between seven young children and their parents to investigate how family and community inform the idiosyncrasies of the art produced and how the school pedagogy conventionalises it (Anning 2002). In the paper, young children's speech is refracted, recalled and requoted from parents rather than directly quoted from the children: 'when she was first drawing, she'd say ...' (Ibid, pp. 203–204). Conversely, a consultation of 30 students from ten schools on their arts-integrated learning (DeMoss & Morris 2002) includes extensive first-person quotations compiled under researcher-written themes. In this, researcher—rather than teacher—interpreted findings, the students have a strong presence in the paper and while overall the responses supported the existing programmes of learning, the paper also includes a number of negative and critically constructive individual responses. Similarly, a paper that consulted 62 students in 12 schools about their decisions to study art contains extensive responses from both respondents and interviewer (Fürst & Nylander 2020), and the students' 'voices' are represented in a nuanced (the 'laughs' are included) and diverse way.

Researchers concerned with social justice and the experiences of students marginalised within and by schools leaned more often to 'voiced' research designs.

Some involved children from specified geographical and cultural backgrounds engaging in a range of traditional and indigenous art practices (Hickman & Sinha 2018; Shikongo 2020). These papers document students' involvement with community-based projects such as making quilts, murals and sculptures or visits from culturally specific artists. Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis' study (2016) of refugee girls in Buffalo, N.Y. using mobile phone apps to make cartographic art contains images and photos of the work, long passages of dialogues between the girls and specific details about the participants' ages and backgrounds. The author embeds these in a detailed cultural and post-colonial context which promotes the sense that she is speaking sensitively on behalf of the girls while having them 'speak' through her research.

Vicky Grube's paper quotes Room 13 students (7–11 years old) directly as they reflect on their art, make ethical decisions about charitable funding, set and enforce art room rules and participate in the various processes involved in running the programme (2015). This paper fits our research responding category, in contrast to the role children play in running the room.

Voiced research offers the possibility of 'speaking back' to the institution. James W. Bequette, for example, points to the problems of misrepresentation and tokenism when the Native American art projects in her school were not contextualised by traditional knowledge and beliefs (2007, p. 369). And Chris Liska Carger's study of using art with bilingual Mexican-American children includes transcribed conversations between the researcher and children, between children and their art teacher and between children themselves (2004). Supplemented with photos of children making art and of the children's artwork, the paper is an example of how eliciting subjugated student voices can support a teacher's or researcher's equity interventions.

## Participating

We focus here on students' active engagement with the research—students acting as a reference group to the researchers, getting involved in aspects of research design and conducting, or co-constructing the research and/or being involved in texts and activities that report the results of the research. Participating in research offers different kinds of agency and influence to responding, and it is important to distinguish how much involvement students have, when, where, with whom and about what, as well as the ethical practices that underpin participation. Not surprisingly, there were less papers in this category ( $n = 13$ ).

Our review contained examples of students actively involved on a regular basis with the management of school art rooms and in pedagogical decision making. The Peace Park project was a two-year collaboration between 6th-grade students and staff of a middle school, a youth arts organisation that also involved members (youth and adults) of a mobile home community, local architects, artists, community groups and volunteers (Krensky 2001). Framed around goals of social activism, community responsibility and collaboration between socially diverse groups, the project involved students attending training sessions in leadership, consensus building and community organising, as well as joining one of seven committees which included design (park and art), public relations, web design, landscaping, surveying (canvassing local opinions) and fundraising. The paper contains many verbatim quotations from students that document their participation in the research, as well as their challenges, personal growth and growing sense of participating in wider democratic processes.



Irida Tsevreni documented a project in which 250 primary school children from eight schools in Athens, Greece participated in a one-year project in which children expressed their ideal environments through painting, drawing and poetry, discussed and formulated options of actionable projects and made decisions through negotiation and voting. The paper is an exemplar of how students can actively participate in project design. They were positioned as 'artists and urban designers with the ability to analyse their environment, synthesize their thoughts, propose new ideas for the improvement of the city', and evaluate the programme (2014, p. 138). Importantly, the paper gives a meaningful voice to the students by documenting their artwork, quotations, dialogues and decisions.

There are a number of papers in which students participate in the activity but not in the research. We have categorised these as 'responding' (e.g. Savva & Trimis 2005; Bradshaw 2018; Wewiora 2019). In others, researchers extol the role of art in empowering students as equal participants in curricular, schools, art spaces and wider communities, and their 'participatory' papers capture some of diversity and complexity of the students through their art and speech, however, there were no indications that the students' ideas were ever put into practice (Tsevreni 2014, p. 151).

## Evaluating

Evaluation involves the systematic collection of information with the aim of improving practice. Students might be involved in evaluation in various ways, from being key informants (similar to voiced research) to being active co-designers, data generators and analysts. Evaluation is both formative and summative and students might play a different role in each. Three of the studies in our corpus document students as evaluators.

The 'Creative Spaces' project engaged primary school children as co-researchers in the study of their engagement with four museums and galleries in the U.K. (Marcus & Trustram 2009). The children 'actively generated and analysed the research evidence, as opposed to being merely observed and interrogated by adult researchers' (p. 5). Children were given cameras, asked to lead guided tours and engaged in other ways which developed their sense of how they could impact on the results (p. 5). The authors noted children's 'increased appetite for learning ... linked to their responsibility as researchers' and 'a richness of response often missing from more conventional forms of consultation and research' (p.19).

Drawing on the work of performance artist Robin Rhode, Intili *et al.* (2015) explored how chalk drawings on school walls and floors could be used to reimagine social situations. The project emphasises how open-ended performance-based art can create 'new possibilities of reality' (p. 46), 'disrupt boundaries' (p. 43) and facilitate the reinterpretation of students' worlds (p. 45).

We are aware of a few papers published after our RER which stress the benefits of research-based participatory arts practice. Leung's *Project Superhero*, for example, used children's imaginative play as a form of socially engaged art, one in which children's voices and subjectivity were constructed through creative collaboration with each other and with the teacher-researcher (2023). Leung argues such social action validates children's competence and agency in institutional and relational settings which often serve as constraints (p. 69).

## Conclusion: An opportunity, an invitation

While student voice and agency were clearly the subject of many papers in the RER, around three-quarters of the 79 papers involved students as respondents, sounding boards and test subjects for pre-proposed ideas. Far fewer (around one-sixth of the 'agency' papers; just over a quarter of the 'voice' papers) documented students as participants, co-designers of research and co-disseminators of results. Fewer still (4% of our 79 combined 'agency' and 'voice' papers) positioned students not only as sources of data and research participants, but as collectors, generators and analysts of data, actively engaged with peers, educators and researchers in a range of performative, dialogic and evaluative tasks. In general, the students in these 'evaluating' studies: were trained in research skills; built their awareness of self, systems, cultures and communities; were engaged in decision making within educational institutions; and acted as advocates, experts and advisors at school boards, community meetings, committees and conferences, some of which they may have organised (Pekrul & Levin 2005, pp. 8–12).

It would be possible to see the relative lack of engagement with the student voice research methods as a deficiency. We don't see it this way. We see it as an invitation. If, as we suggested at the start of this paper, arts educators and arts education researchers are committed to pedagogies that recognise and respect students' agency and voice and see them as school students able to research their own practice, it is only a small step to think about congruent methodologies. We imagine opportunities for arts education researchers to move beyond consultative approaches to involve children as co-constructors of a 'radical dialogue' in which all parties are engaged in the negotiation, execution and evaluation of collaborative research (Dahlberg & Moss 2005, p. 101). Student-centred methodologies involve careful consideration of the nuances of the social contexts of students, staff and institutions; reflection on the inherent power relationships of researchers and participants; scrutiny of research methods; training students in a range of research skills; a shifting of the subject positions of students; and a deliberate slowing down of the process in order to facilitate open and meaningful communication in which the student voice, as activity, utterance and/or artefact may be heard (Chung 2023, p. 15). Such a practice of listening promotes children's democratic voice, agency and political awareness by bringing them into dialogue with systems of power and responsibility—things that we understand art educators to be deeply committed to.

We also offer this paper as an invitation for arts education researchers to go beyond the conventional research methods toolkit, to use artistic practices to develop innovative research tools which prioritise children as co-researchers. This would, we suggest, not only be a way to celebrate and honour the diverse and multifaceted voices of children as set out in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup> but also to contribute to building the repertoires of arts education researchers and educational researchers more generally.

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## Endnotes

1. We only had funds for three-months of research and no budget for publications.
2. See Thomson and Maloy (2022) for the full report with details of the papers in this section.
3. For example, the UNCRC covers children's right to: 'have their views considered and taken seriously' (Article 12), 'be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information' (Article 13), and an education that develops their 'personality, talents and abilities to the full' (Article 29).

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