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Participatory Methods Fostering Young People's Empowerment in Education

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Introduction

At first glance, and according to the dominant view, learning outcomes may appear to be objective and measurable: they are quantifiable 'outputs' of the learners' trajectories within the educational system. However, the CLEAR project¹ takes a different perspective. CLEAR aims to explore the processual character of the construction of learning outcomes, as one which is necessarily situated and shaped by the relationships among various actors in the field of education. To further deepen this exploration and enhance the relational dimension of the analysis, CLEAR complements its more 'traditional' mixed-methods research scheme with participatory research actions. This makes the project particularly relevant for the discussion provided in this chapter, as it experiments with an integration of a Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA).² Justification for applying the TPA in CLEAR is predicated on two main reasons. The *first* is to increase the project's overall capacity to give value to the different voices animating the field of education and to find proper languages to engage, relate with, inform and better understand them. The *second* regards the reflexivity potentially triggered by the participatory methods in all those involved in the research, considering educational environments as 'spaces' where (especially) youths can exercise their relationship with institutions. As we will discuss, educational institutions are involved in the broader processes of de-socialization and de-institutionalization (Touraine, 1997) of society; that is, the weakening of the mechanisms of transmission to new generations of the roles, norms and values that guide social life, and the disruption of the mechanisms

of belonging to groups and institutions capable of stabilizing their internal cohesion and managing their own transformation.

This does not imply the simple dissolution of institutions. On the contrary, it requires them to rethink their role as a support for the subjectivation of young people; the process through which autonomous subjectivities – active agents of social change – are shaped. Subjectivation, in the context of educational processes, is to be understood as complementary to the process of socialization as the formation of social actors called upon for the reproduction of norms and roles (Dubet, 2007). Given their impact in shaping learners' biographies and promoting specific forms of knowledge and, broadly, profiles of citizenship (Benasso et al., 2022), the processes of construction of learning outcomes are a crucial dimension of social integration (see the introduction of this volume). Therefore, fostering a collective and participatory reflection on the dynamics and power (un)balances, which intervene in producing learning outcomes, can support different actors in acquiring a deeper awareness of their individual relation with institutions.

This chapter will discuss the reasons why research on learning outcomes, and education more generally, can benefit from the integration of participatory methods, showing the main theoretical and methodological references considered when designing the TPA for CLEAR.

Why participation matters?

Long-lasting processes such as individualization (the emancipation of the individual from traditional models of self-definition) and de-politicization (the removal of the political character of collective decisions) (Alteri, Leccardi & Raffini, 2017; Beck, 1992) impact social bonds, the relationship between individuals and the dominant understanding of membership in social groups.

As these dimensions are changed, both in their structure and cultural framing, the very notion of social integration is transformed which introduces a new 'grammar of society'. For this new grammar to be read by social research, methodological and epistemological approaches that can fit the profound change of concepts such as education and socialization, participation become necessary. More precisely, attention must be placed on the progressive emancipation of individuals from traditional models of self-definition as subjective identity conforms less and less to models transmitted by reference groups (from primary groups to, in a broader sense, class and other structures). To frame these changes,

we draw from Touraine (1997), who sees individualization as a result of the processes of 'de-socialization' and 'de-institutionalization'. The former impacts the intergenerational continuity in terms of roles, values and norms. The second refers to the increasing 'gap' between individuals and institutions which, usually, pairs broader room for subjective agency with a reduced institutional 'grip' on individual lives. These processes foster forms of de-traditionalization which erode the linear reproduction of norms, values and identities. As a 'side effect' of the expanding freedom of self-determination, individuals are charged with the responsibility of autonomously constructing their biographies by operating choices with limited possibility to draw from institutionalized courses of action. Individuals' choices and identities become increasingly more difficult to understand as consequences of subjective adaptation to social roles. However, a tendency to reproduce an 'over-socialized' vision of society is still quite widespread in social research. It implies that social actors are often involved in research as mere 'information bearers' to be activated by researchers who 'discover' the effects of structures through the analysis of their stories.

At the same time, an 'ultra-individualized' view of social integration risks representing society as a network of monads who act according to their interests, identification and values. Thanks to its consistency with the neoliberal ideology, this latter vision resonates in many educational and labour market policies targeting young people in the last decades (see, for instance, the European Commission's Youth Guarantee).³ Such approaches are focused on the empowerment of self-managing individuals. They often produce a Matthew effect (Merton, 1968), which selects the 'best deserving' and ends up stigmatizing those who, due to their own failure, are not skilled enough.

Challenges are, thus, raised in terms of epistemological framing of the objects of social research and operationalization of the concepts that lead it as well as of power balances among the involved actors. A step forward can be made by acknowledging that no dimension of social research – research questions, objects, definitions of leading concepts, research designs and goals – is neutral. Rather, social research is always situated; both in contextual and 'political' terms, and the knowledge produced by research necessarily embodies this 'partiality'⁴ as it results from the negotiation of different views and values. Furthermore, social sciences show an emancipatory potential when they provide tools to understand that society is a social construction. Such an acknowledgement implies that the current models of society could also be different and that critical social science can empower people to actively participate in creating social change instead of passively reproducing the social order. In this sense,

participation can be considered a means for 'biographical self-determination in public and/or through the use of public institutions' (Walther et al., 2020, p. 3). From this, different actions carried out in and/or addressing the public can be interpreted as participation.

The application of participatory methods presents as a good strategy to find a balance between the different visions of the relationship of individuals to structure which inform the epistemological approaches in social science and, thus, enhance the emancipatory impact of related research. Indeed, participatory research can be seen to recognize and value the sub-political dimension of social research. This dimension is revealed through the interactions among participating individuals, none of whom are passive recipients but actors in the production of knowledge – and of society – by the expression of their views.

Participatory methods typically display a strong heterogeneity and manifold ways of application. However, by drawing from Melucci's (1998) reflections on the characteristics of non-standard methods able to fit the changes in society, we can find several common threads among them:

- The centrality of language: There is no actual understanding without the mediation of languages which are always situated and contextualized, not least according to structural dimensions such as gender, age and ethnicity. Consequently, a participatory research process must create conditions for the people involved to express themselves in their 'natural' languages.
- A profound redefinition of the relationship between the observer and the field: 'One could say that, from an observer-field dichotomy, these methods promote a shift towards an observer-in-the-field connection. Everything that is observed in social reality is observed by someone, who is in turn embedded in social relations' (1998, p. 22). For these reasons, the 'traditional' role of the observer and the relationship between the observer and the so-called 'research object' can be subverted in participatory research.
- The double hermeneutic in which social research is caught: That is, social research does not produce 'absolute' knowledge but 'plausible interpretations of how actors, in turn, make sense of their actions' (1998, p. 23). As participatory research necessarily produces situated knowledge, it abandons any purpose of generalization.
- A shift from the idea that research results are, in themselves, transparent because they are conveyed through the language of the scientific community to the idea that 'every presentation of results is a form of narration' (1998,

p. 23). It is just one possible strategy among others and this recognition introduces a perspective accepting of a polyphony of voices participating in the research. Participatory research makes polyphony one of its key characteristics and fosters methodological reflection about the possibility of creating favourable conditions for it.

Overall, these features lead to a redefinition of the very aims of social research whose objective is no longer explaining reality as independent from the observer. Rather, it is a form of translation of the meanings produced within a certain system of relations to another system of relations; namely, the one between the scientific community and society at large. Researchers are in charge of this translation, mediating with the involved people who express their views through different languages. In terms of research design, moving away from the linear connection between hypothesis and verification, the shift is towards a recursive, emergent process of explanation that produces knowledge through the dialogical exchange among participants. To use Brown's words, 'participatory research is not a single, unified methodology, but a problematic approach to research, which continues to make assumptions about knowledge-production and the value and worth of research' (2022, p. 202). Therefore, introducing participation in social research ruptures the schematization of research processes – from research questions to their empirical operationalization – with ongoing negotiations of the very meanings and aims of the research which are always, potentially, subject to revision, deviations and reframing.

Impacts of the legacy of participatory approaches in social sciences on the CLEAR project

We can broadly frame participatory approaches in social sciences as manifold methods and techniques that involve the active participation of individuals or groups in the research process. They can engage stakeholders and/or communities at different stages of research from its design to the dissemination of its results. As a general aim, such approaches seek to contribute to the democratization of research and the accessibility of related knowledge. Examples of current applications of participatory approaches in social sciences include:

- Participatory Action Research. This is an approach entailing the active involvement of communities in identifying and addressing social issues and is one in which the research is conducted collaboratively, with the

community members and researchers working together to design and implement interventions;

- **Community-Based Participatory Research.** This emphasizes the collaboration between researchers and communities to address the effects of inequalities with a strong sensibility for the territorial dimension. The community members play a significant role in the research process, including identifying research questions, collecting and analysing data and disseminating findings;
- **Participatory Evaluation.** Here, the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation of programmes or interventions is paramount. Stakeholders provide feedback on the programme's effectiveness, its relevance to the community and the appropriateness of the evaluation methodology; and
- **Art-Based Methods.** Manifold forms of participatory methods are included in this approach. They, collectively, consider the application of art to be a tool for relation, a means of expression beyond the boundaries of formal languages and a strategy to produce non-conventional data, often entailing forms of performativity for participants at both an expressive and bodily level.

The participatory actions provided in the TPA of the CLEAR project share with such approaches the common aim of overcoming, at least in some stages of the process, the 'traditional' hierarchy between researchers and involved people. They also share the ambition of producing results usable by the very heterogeneous stakeholders in the field of education (from policymakers to young learners) and stimulating stakeholders' reflexivity.⁵ Particularly relevant, in this sense, is the organization of Innovation Forums (IFs) in each partner country in the concluding months of the project. IFs are deliberative spaces aimed at stimulating debate and collective knowledge production among the diverse profiles of social actors reached in the previous stages of the research. IFs are locally organized public events involving CLEAR's different target groups. Members of these groups meet researchers from the project to discuss together CLEAR's results, learnings and open questions. Based on stimuli deriving from the previous lines of empirical research, during the IFs, group discussions will be managed to pursue the full participation of the different stakeholders (from policymakers to young people) and to enable everyone to express themselves, in their own language, seeking to stimulate an open exchange. They perform the double function of a further elaboration of the results gathered through the

mixed-methods approach of CLEAR and a deeper adaptation of the research outputs.

In designing the TPA, the lessons learned from a few seminal experiences of the application of participation in social research have also been considered. Particular regard has been given to the understanding of emancipatory education in the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970), the collaboration in the definition of the problems to be tackled by research in Lewin's Action Research (1946) and, above all, the creation of conditions for collective deliberation in Touraine's Sociological Intervention (Touraine, 1981).

In the 1970s, the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (1970) developed his critical pedagogy to overcome standardized models of education and promote new forms of popular education. According to Freire, education should be an empowering experience rather than a mere means of transmitting learning content as is usually interpreted in educational systems. To overcome the 'banking' (1970) dynamic, where teachers 'deposit' knowledge in 'learners-depositories' (Jacobs, 2018), Freire posits that educational processes should be participatory and aim to support students in a shared process of identity formation. This is achievable only through a collaborative process in which both teacher and students are active. However, to make participation a two-way process, not only must teachers encourage students to take an active role in determining their educational paths but they must also critically revise their own privilege; thus, opening themselves up to learning from their students. In this, we can find a significant methodological proposal in terms of subversion of the powers in knowledge definition and production. Furthermore, according to Freire, participation is not only important for individual learning but also for social and political transformation. He argued that education should not only help individuals develop their understanding of the world but also stimulate a critical consciousness that enables them to identify and challenge the inequalities they face. This model of pedagogy, thereby, considers the field of education to be a potential place for societal transformation as it seeks to foster a change-oriented collective reflexivity⁶ through individual empowerment.

The Action Research method was devised by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) in the first half of the twentieth century. The approach aims to produce change through the identification of significant problems for stakeholders who participate in a process typically divided into three phases: planning, action and reflection. In the first phase, the research team and participants collaborate on the framing of the problem they intend to investigate, give themselves a

set of objectives and design a plan of action. This plan is implemented in the action phase during which data is collected to evaluate its effectiveness. In the reflection phase, the results are analysed and discussed collectively. They are then used to inform the next iteration of the action research cycle. This aspect of recursiveness is a relevant inspiration for the TPA in CLEAR. It 'teaches' how to transgress the linearity which usually shapes standard social research processes. These standard processes tend to resonate with the positivist tension towards empirical verification of theoretical frameworks promoted by the scientific community. Moreover, in addition to the idea of opening to stakeholders' participation in the definition of problems considered relevant to research and in the application of strategies to overcome them, this approach constitutes a step towards an understanding of research processes as necessarily situated and subject to progressive fine-tuning.

The Sociological Intervention (SI) can be considered a type of Action Research as its goal is not only to create scientific knowledge but also to provide a resource for action for the people involved. It is not meant to directly impact social practices but to provide stakeholders with instruments for self-analysis. It is co-research – or an 'accompanied self-analysis' (Hamel, 1998) – which involves groups being created *ad hoc* by researchers under criteria of social background homogeneity.

SI links empirical research closely to a theory of society (Brincker & Gundelach, 2005). It observes reality but also brings to light and analyses social relations to define the different dimensions which structure the actions of people. Thus, it puts into practice the theory of actionalism (Touraine, 1981), whose distinguishing feature is placing the social actor at the centre of theoretical attention. It has the goal of 'reconstructing and exploring a struggle to become an actor' (McDonald, 2002, p. 249). The actionalist theory stands in radical opposition to structural-functionalism, with its adherence to a positivist epistemology and its hyper-socialized view of the individual. Actors, according to Touraine, 'are not defined by their conformity to rules and norms, but by a relationship to themselves, by their capacity to construct themselves as actors, capable of changing their environment and of reinforcing their autonomy' (2000, p. 902). Individuals can self-analyse their actions and the situations in which they are involved. Accordingly, SI 'relies on the reflexive ability of the actors [that are called to] engage in a process of reflection, even introspection, in which they analyse how they view and interpret the social world and question their ability to act and participate in this world' (Cousin & Rui, 2011, p. 24).

By accepting the idea that the individual can make sense of their behaviour, SI moves away from the positivist approaches which distance researchers and social actors, their emotions and their practical experience in the name of the epistemological rupture. SI promotes a confrontation both between scholars and participants and between the group involved and their interlocutors and opponents. SI emancipates research from the linear connection between hypothesis and hypothesis verification to pursue a recursive explanation of the exploration of the processes in which knowledge is produced through the dialogical exchange between observer and observed.

The involved social actors take on a dual role in the research: on the one hand, they are part of the researchers' object of study; on the other hand, they act as a medium between the researcher and the broader social reality which is under investigation. In SI, a group of participants meets several times for a maximum time of six months. In the first stage, as in a traditional focus group, the research team asks the participants to discuss their actions and shared social experience, explore their identity and identify other social actors perceived either as allies or opponents who are meant to be involved as interlocutors in the second stage. In the third stage, hypotheses developed during preparatory fieldwork are presented by the researchers to the group. The goal is to construct a shared analysis of the interactions they have been involved in. SI can, thus, be seen as a 'deliberative space where sociologists can debate their reasoning and hypothesis, where they offer actors the opportunity to discuss and contest them' and the final step of restitution is the moment where researchers offer actors 'the opportunity to give meaning to their experience on the basis of the work undertaken together' (Cousin & Rui, 2011, p. 127). According to McDonald, SI represents an attempt to put into practice the communicative production of knowledge theorized by Habermas in a context where 'neither the research participants nor their interlocutors, nor the sociologists facilitating the dialogue, control the relationship' (McDonald, 2002, p. 253). Applied to promote co-research practices with groups facing disadvantages and vulnerabilities – such as youths in vulnerable conditions – SI may represent a tool to promote the empowerment of participants, enabling them to construct themselves as subject (Cousin & Rui, 2011, p. 126).

The experiences discussed regarding the application of participatory methods in the social sciences highlight the importance of fostering flexible research processes centred on collaboration, empowering participants and co-creating knowledge reflexively. In designing the TPA to be integrated into the research

agenda of the CLEAR project, these ambitious objectives were adjusted to align with the varying levels of familiarity that the different research teams had with participatory methods, the sustainability of managing participation in terms of financial and human resources and the need to accommodate the project's timeline. As a result, the insights gained from these key principles served more as guiding and sensitizing tendencies rather than strict 'methodological orthodoxies'. This approach enabled the project's Consortium, which was mostly new to experimentation with participation, to find the appropriate application of the TPA.

Benefits of doing participatory research in education

In this section, we discuss the capacity of participatory methods to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of different stakeholders in the field of education which we acknowledge might sound 'somewhat optimistic if not naïve' (see Metz, Boaz & Robert, 2019, p. 331). However, we consider that participatory methods hold the potential for transforming the relationships between young people, policymakers, practitioners and academic researchers, thus shedding more light on the processes of constructing learning outcomes in different social contexts.

Participatory methods have been used in studies on the take-up and evaluation of welfare support programmes and other community interventions, social care inquiries, urban renovation, organizational change, health, biomedical and archaeological research (e.g. Brown, 2022; Mathijssen & Wildemeersch, 2014; Thomas & Lea, 2014). As with other research methodologies, their design and application vary with the concrete national, regional and local contexts, the epistemological perspective of the researcher/s and the readiness and capabilities of the involved stakeholders. Social anthropologists often claim that their approaches are best suited to collaboration with research participants and communication with and influence over wider society (Lamphere, 2004). An interesting example of an anthropological participatory action research is the project 'Together and Equal' conducted by the 'Stojna Krastanova' Foundation (2024) in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The team defined their method as 'emergency anthropology' with the aim to 'solve a crisis in the community of Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war'. They built upon Eriksen's (2017) statement that any anthropological research relies, on the one hand, on the researcher's experience, knowledge and sensitivity to otherness as well as compassion for the situation

of vulnerable groups and, on the other hand, on the researcher's ability to carry out humanistic translation between cultures and commitment to contemporary humanitarian crises.

There are diverse understandings of the opportunities and merits of participatory design in youth studies and education research. Schelbe and colleagues (2015, p. 504) point out that young people's voices are rarely heard in social studies and discuss many researchers' objections to their involvement, such as 'logistical (e.g. gaining access) or ethical (e.g. coercion risks based on their developmental level) concerns'. Young people are often considered immature and incompetent, highly vulnerable and in need of protection and care. In contrast, a growing body of literature values youths' perspectives and sees young people, even those in disadvantaged situations, as active agents capable of constructing and communicating their experiences (Kirk, 2007; Pilkington, Pollock & Franc, 2017; Walther & Pohl, 2004). Such studies usually build on the understanding that learning for participation is not limited to citizenship education in formal school settings. It also 'encompass[es] the wide variety of processes of education, formation and learning that can occur at many different times and in many different settings throughout people's lives' (Biesta, De Bie & Wildemeersch, 2014, p. xiv). Percy-Smith and colleagues (2020) argue that participatory methods are most relevant to youth research as they are close to the everyday practice of youth work.

Before highlighting the merits of applying participatory methods in youth research, we need to acknowledge their various uses in social inquiries. Brown (2022, p. 201) describes these as a 'continuum from being minimally participatory to being fully egalitarian, whereby realistically most participatory research designs are situated somewhere in between the two' (Wulf-Andersen, Follesø & Olsen, 2021). Similarly variable are the specific ways young people participate in the different stages of the research; whether from early on in the formulation of research questions through the design and implementation to the methodology to formulating policy recommendations and (co-)authoring academic publications. Accordingly, the positive implications of youth participation in the research process can be traced in varying degrees and shapes – from broadening the research scope and data collection to prompting social change and empowering individuals and groups in vulnerable situations – and its effectiveness can be traced at multi-dimensional levels: society, community and individual (Kim, 2016). Call-Cummings and Ross (2022) warn against binary understandings of either fully participatory design or no participation at all. With these various perspectives in mind, we discuss the expected positive

effects of research participation on the three main groups involved in youth research in the field of education: young people, policymakers and researchers.

The main claim of youth researchers using participatory methods is that the added value of implementing this approach lies in empowering youth as a social group to change their place in the world. Transforming the role of young people from mere objects of social research into active participants works in favour of the right of children and youth to be heard and to influence the decision-making in matters of interest to them – the right acknowledged in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Koch and Kralik (2006, p. 23) argue that participatory research is led by the belief that social justice and equity are enhanced when democratic principles are incorporated in and guide research. Indeed, they see the overarching aim of such inquiry in fostering ‘social change which addresses the inequality of power distribution’. Following Gramsci (1971), who underlined the need for developing people’s capacities to think differently and challenge existing assumptions and norms in order to overcome the hegemony of the ruling class, Koch and Kralik argue that empowerment is the most desirable outcome of youth involvement in the process of constructing and using their own knowledge. Likewise, Percy-Smith and colleagues (2020) see participatory research as part of the struggle of youth to claim their position as equal and active citizens. For Kim (2016), participatory research allows youth to develop critical consciousness and encourages them to take action in solving social problems. The potential of participatory methods to foster social change to the benefit of youth is conditional on the orientation of the research towards not only making new or hidden facts known but also pressuring power-holders to institute adequate policies and for these to be enacted (Lamphere, 2004).

Many scholars applying community-based participatory research focus on the change in political, economic and institutional structures for youth, taking youth as a social category. However, we should not ignore the positive benefits of individual young people as contributors to the research process. Acceding that not all forms of youth participation reach the full potential of action research, we should consider other possible merits of the approach. Involving young people in any stage of the research allows the individual participants to initiate a process of developing new understandings of themselves which can influence their subjective identities positively. When telling their life stories, young people act as experts of their personal experiences and learn to articulate and reflect on them. Seeing how they impact the research process can raise the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people – even those in multi-disadvantaged or vulnerable positions. Possibly the most valuable individual effect from taking

part is the development of their abilities for reflexivity and critical thinking on their conditions, and the meaning of education and learning in their life plans. Another potential merit is learning how to handle communication with representatives of educational authorities and adults in general. When young people are involved, not only as objects of research but as partners to a certain extent, it can result in the young person experiencing new, positive and empowering social relations (Warming, 2018). Their participation in discussions of the research design, formulation of hypotheses and/or engagement in the field work can also develop their research skills which can open new avenues for them. The collaborative relationship between researchers and participants, who might serve as translators, interviewers or data interpreters, encourages co-learning and skills development (Lamphere, 2004). Cahill (2007, p. 307) argues that a significant aspect of the capacity-building potential of participatory methods is that participants 'might come into contact with complex theoretical approaches in ways that make sense to them'. Of course, such group and individual benefits for the young are highly dependent on researchers' capabilities for reflection throughout the process, their sensitivity and flexibility in solving problems, their values and their readiness to give away and share some of their 'expert' power with the young participants. The young themselves have differentiated readiness and abilities to take advantage of opportunities for capacity building and it is important for researchers to acknowledge these differences (Wulf-Andersen, Follesø & Olsen, 2021).

The other group expected to profit from conducting social research with participatory methods is comprised of policy experts – professionals, managers and practitioners in youth, education and social policies. Policy studies often verify that the participation of beneficiaries increases the effectiveness of policy interventions by expanding the 'uptake' by the beneficiaries. According to Metz, Boaz and Roberts (2019), through participation, beneficiaries may develop some sense of ownership of a development intervention by investing time, gaining knowledge and invoking some level of control over decision-making; when individuals participate in a programme, they may consider it to be a part of their 'extended self'. This is all the more valid for youth and education research where the involvement of policymakers and educators, as well as young learners and researchers, can widen the scope and efficiency of the policies. Bhaird (2013) argues that participatory methods, unlike traditional, didactic educational approaches, promote group discussions where participants are encouraged to define social problems and construct solutions on their own terms. Such collaborative methods not only allow the professionals to understand the very

heterogeneous factors of social vulnerability faced by young people (Rambla & Kovacheva, 2023) but also why certain supportive programmes aimed to help the young in their life transitions are not actually used by their intended beneficiaries (Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2022). Involving policymakers and practitioners in participatory research with young people may challenge the very assumptions on which education policy frameworks are based and foster the incorporation of young people's understandings of the place of education in the wider process of biographical learning and construction of learning outcomes. Here again, persisting power asymmetries, value differences and conflicting priorities among different stakeholders can undermine the positive implications of participatory methods, as Bhaird (2013) warns. Nevertheless, the openness and flexibility of the researcher, which allow a change in the power dynamics and facilitate trust and reciprocity among all participants, can induce change in the views and practices of policy experts and practitioners themselves.

Finally, we should highlight the benefits which participatory methods can bring for the researchers and the research process. Many authors (e.g. Cahill, 2007; Kim, 2016) argue that collaborative participation of young people and other stakeholders has the potential to produce new valid knowledge by widening the research questions as well as sharpening the data collection and analysis methods and extending the dissemination of the results to a wider audience. Koch and Kralik (2006) underline that researchers also learn when creating a shared space for research cooperation. Through their mutual engagement in the research process, researchers and young people come to better understand each other, build mutual trust and value the diversity of perspectives. It is important to take into consideration that participatory methods imply a change in researchers' role – from that of experts to one of collaborators (Lamphere, 2004) or, as Percy-Smith and colleagues (2020, p. 195) define it, a shift of professional identities and practices away from the 'expert' who directs the process towards the reflexive social pedagogue who facilitates and enables the young participants. It is researchers, as much as the young people, policymakers and practitioners, who learn how to participate. Building upon critical pedagogical approaches, Cahill (2007) goes further by insisting that the researcher should also take up a training role in helping young people learn how to do social research, thus increasing their capacity to analyse and transform their own lives and democratize their societies. In the same vein, Roose, Bouverne-De Bie and Roets (2014, p. 116) contend that collaboration with the young people involved is a way to dilute the power of the researcher and to orient the process of knowledge construction towards the development of a public debate.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have presented the aims and the theoretical framework that orient the integration of participatory activities in the research of the CLEAR project. We have also drawn attention to the potential benefits of introducing participatory methods in the study of education as the main field of the construction of learning outcomes. While we bring to the fore the added value of the integration of participatory activities in a project such as CLEAR, we are also aware of a range of risks which may arise in implementing the TPA.

We can collate many potential risks under the notion of 'methodological populism', namely the rhetorical application of participation as a strategy to legitimate decisions and research results that have not been shared with stakeholders involved in different stages of the process. Often, this occurs when there are unrealistic promises of horizontality and overlapping roles of researchers and participants, leading to articulated benefits which cannot be guaranteed and, thus, to a sense of manipulation and frustration. Such feelings are likely to be induced in participants if they do not perceive actual benefits from their engagement. Disappointing expectations often bring negative effects which are far greater than the non-activation of social actors (i.e. the problem allegedly justifying the use of participation). In addition, frustration may have the effect of discouraging the continuation of the experience or compromising the quality of the collaboration, thereby jeopardizing the very cognitive objectives pursued.

Methodological populism can, thus, hide an extractivist⁷ (Serafini, 2022) attitude towards participants under the facade of a democratic opening of research to civic society. We deem it crucial that the researchers who mean to promote participation gain awareness about these risks and develop a 'methodological sensitivity' (Greenway et al., 2021) so as to envisage and possibly limit the risks. This is especially pertinent when young people in disadvantaged and/or vulnerable conditions are included among the different profiles of involved stakeholders. We can fairly assume that these youths may share a feeling of distance – and sometimes exclusion – from the institutions and, more broadly, from the adult world. As adults and representatives of institutions, whether actual or perceived, researchers must take this positioning into account when asking them to commit to a process which may charge them with responsibility and perceived pressure in terms of expectations. That is why power imbalances should neither be neglected nor merely rhetorically recognized. Rather, they should be 'used' to stimulate awareness by, for instance,

placing power imbalances as the central assumption to work on, through role-playing or other creative forms of symbolic inversion of power dynamics in safe settings.⁸

Against this background, integrating participatory activities into the empirical workflow of a research project, which is designed on more traditional methods and necessarily driven by strict regulation in terms of ethics, time management and general coordination, can prove challenging yet fruitful. Indeed, the application of participatory methods entails a revision of established routines in research. Participatory methods primarily question how and by whom the scientific knowledge is constructed and redress the power imbalances usually built into research processes: co-researching blurs the distinction between researchers and 'objects' of research.

Hence, the CLEAR project is not fully participatory. Rather, it experiments with the integration of participation within a more standard research outline. Through a collaborative process of design, the TPA was set among the project partners. These members tailored solutions to integrate participatory actions into different 'moments' of the empirical work foreseen by the project, ranging from research design to data collection, data analysis and discussion and dissemination of findings. In shaping the TPA, particular efforts were made to raise the awareness of the researchers, to prevent them from perceiving themselves as being 'on a mission' of guiding participants towards transformational goals but ending up asserting a difference of status. Instead, the designed forms of collaboration are based on a clear distinction of roles between the researchers and the participants whose different profiles and structural positionings interact in a cooperative relationship.

In addition, the participatory dimension is enhanced in the project by the organization of the IFs. These closing events, planned to take place at the final stage of the project, are meant as deliberative spaces aimed at fostering discussion, reflection and cross-fertilization of ideas, and at promoting the consideration of different stakeholders' opinions and understandings of the learning outcomes.

As an overall impact, the integration of participatory actions in CLEAR seeks to strengthen the 'internal' synchronization of the multiple research lines in the project as it creates links among different outputs. Moreover, the IFs provide a chance to collectively elaborate on the project results. Therefore, the TPA enhances the general ability of the project to give value to different standpoints and 'voices' participating in the field of education with particular regard to those voices usually not 'heard' by policymakers, namely young people in vulnerable conditions.

Notes

- 1 The research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) is exploring the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across European regions. It is conducted between 2022 and 2025 in eight EU countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. For more information, please visit: <https://clear-horizon.eu/>. The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061155.
- 2 As will be detailed in the following, the notion of 'transversal' refers to the multiple solutions for the integration of participatory activities that cross the different lines of empirical work of the project impacting research at different stages and with different aims.
- 3 https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-employment-strategy/youth-employment-support/reinforced-youth-guarantee_en
- 4 Starting from the 1970s, feminist and post-colonial studies have contributed to an 'epistemological turn' in social sciences questioning the assumption of their objectivity. The feminist approach brought to light the extent to which the dominant scientific paradigms were expressions of men's views which marginalize other perspectives. Instead, it proposed a new understanding of objectivity as 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988) which is always shaped by the relation of the actors involved in the research and their different structural positionings. Post-colonial studies have tackled the naturalization of Eurocentric knowledge. For example, Said (2003) argued that the Eurocentric discourse, which resonates in the dominant paradigm of social sciences, is functional to the confirmation of the alleged superiority of Western culture over other cultures, and it limits the visibility of alternative forms of knowledge.
- 5 Specifically, participatory actions (PA) are integrated into the different streams of empirical work in CLEAR. They include, for instance, the discussion of preliminary results with a pool of experts in the field coming from disciplines not included in the project's Consortium, the design of products of dissemination targeted to non-academic audiences, and the definition of research tools such as narrative interview guidelines. In addition, all the PAs provided in CLEAR 'feed' the debates on the occasion of the Innovation Forums by producing ad hoc materials deriving from the empirical work.
- 6 To put these goals into practice, Freire developed the well-known Theatre of the Oppressed method (Boal, 1993), which applies drama as a tool for social and political change. The method usually involves people experiencing different forms of exclusion and inequality, and consists of a series of techniques and exercises that

allow participants to explore social and political issues affecting their lives through the staging of situations of injustice.

- 7 In social research, extractivism can be framed as the researchers' exploitation of different symbolic and/or material resources of the involved people.
- 8 According to Dubet, new pedagogies oppose passive learning, simple memorization and conformism, and promote the activation and subjectivation of the pupil. They are no longer seen as being like an empty container to be filled but as a 'singularity that the school must recognize. ... The school is not expected to discipline children in order to make them grow, but to help them become what they already are' (Dubet, 2007, p. 56). This radically transforms the teacher's role and relationship with the pupil and promotes a critical distancing from the role: it is not the role which constitute the person, roles have to be 'inhabited by the person' (Dubet, 2007, p. 61).

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