*Unveiling Dimensions: A Systematic Review of Participatory Research with Young People in Out-of-School Contexts**

Chiara Carla Montà, Daniela Bianchi, Monica Pentucci**

Abstract

Participatory research with young people is expanding rapidly, yet the challenge of establishing a clear framework for its implementation persists. This contribution presents a systematic review which adopts a structured process based on an adapted PRISMA protocol. The review, conducted within the B-YOUth Forum—an interdisciplinary research laboratory open to young people— explores the landscape of participatory research with young people and investigates the employed methodologies, topics, and tools. Highlighting a shift from research on youth to research with youth, the review addresses ethical complexities and advocates for a collaborative approach between professional and youth researchers. The literature reveals a rich and multifaceted field, with this article contributing by reviewing, contextualizing, and building upon existing research. Despite challenges, participatory research emerges as a powerful tool for emancipating young people and societies.

Keywords: *PRISMA; Research with young people; Youth; Non-formal contexts.*

1. Introduction

Participatory research involving young people[1] is becoming increasingly widespread, however it lacks a clear framework. This contribution

* The paper is the outcome of the joint work of the three Authors; however, parr.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 were drafted by Daniela Bianchi; parr. 2 by Monica Pentucci; parr. 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 4 by Chiara Carla Montà.

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1 In the literature, it is difficult to define the concept of youth. This is because the meaning of age varies from culture to culture and depends on socio-economic and political factors (Honkatukia & Rättilä, 2023). Although the United Nations itself seems to refer to an age between 15 and 24, it has somewhat different definitions of youth, which the UN Secretariat recognises (United Nations, 2013). As far as the European Union and the Council of Europe are concerned, the term 'youth' refers to those between 15 and 30 years of age (Council of Europe, 2016; European Union, 2023).

Civitas educationis, a. XIII, n. 2, dicembre 2024 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine
Web: universitypress.unisob.na.it/ojs/index.php/civitaseducationis • ISSN (online): 2281-9568
• ISBN: 9791222317953 • DOI: 10.7413/2281-9568117
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is intended for those who are interested in learning about or conducting research with young people, whether they be academics, practitioners, or students in the field of human sciences. Specifically, it presents a literature review which adopts a systematic process based on PRISMA protocol (Page *et al.*, 2021), focusing on *how* participatory research with young people can be conducted. Participatory research is an umbrella concept, which includes several constructs such as youth-led research, participatory action research, and often the terms are used interchangeably. Moreover, young people assume different roles within these processes which range from being participants, to informants, from assistants to partners.

Despite this complexity, the field of participatory research with young people has witnessed substantial growth and attention within the scholarly literature in recent years. The primary reasons for engaging young people in research can be summarized as follows (Kim, 2017): encouraging their active involvement in generating knowledge regarding contemporary youth, thereby enabling them to participate more effectively in democratic decision-making processes based on the insights gained. Additionally, there has been a growing inclination to view their involvement in research as an educational endeavor, yielding educational advantages (Alderson, 2008). As a result, there is a growing tendency towards conducting research with, rather than on, youth.

The examination of youth participatory approaches within the literature is not isolated but is part of a broader discourse encompassing multiple facets of this research approach and relating to its ontological and epistemological assumptions. To this end, in recent years, literature reviews focusing on different aspects of doing research with young people have been conducted. Jacquez, Vaughn and Wagner (2013), for example, investigate the extent of youth participation, whereas Anyon, Bender, Kennedy and Dechants (2018), and Shamrova and Cummings (201) summarise the findings of research with young people. Cullen and Walsh's (2020) review pertains specifically to ethical aspects. Jacquez, Vaughn and Wagner's (2013) review focused on the participation of young people in such projects, discovering that youngsters were not always completely involved in all phases of the research. Shamrova and Cummings (2017) focused on capacity building of the participants in the research discovering increases in social justice awareness, social and cognitive development, perceptions of youth as change agents, and stronger relationships with adults and the broader community. Anyon, Bender, Kennedy and Dechants (2018) sought to improve the understanding of youth participatory action research (YPAR) programmes in critical ways, with a specific attention to empirical approaches.

Moreover, a specific body of literature focuses on ethical considerations (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). In fact, while this approach has been associated with numerous benefits, it has also given rise to ethical issues that warrant critical attention (Teixeira *et al.*, 2021). In fact, research with young people always contains assumptions about the nature of the young person and of youth in general, and these can affect every aspect of the research

conducted with them. As Chabot, Shoveller, Spencer and Johnson (2012) underline when young people are involved in research, age is a discriminant: limits are often set in alignment with the age of majority where the research is taking place. Therefore, young people are often viewed as passive research participants (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). This is even more so when the category of young people includes minors (people under the age of 18). To this end, traditional ethical frameworks can be restrictive and limiting in terms of potential for actively including them (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010).

In conclusion, the body of literature related to youth participatory research is rich and multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of topics, methodologies, and ethical concerns. This article contributes to this growing body of work by reviewing, building upon and contextualising previous research in the field. It specifically focuses on out-of-school contexts, which are crucial educational and developmental contexts for young people (Vandell, Pierce & Dadisman, 2005).

This review has been designed and carried out within the context of B-YOUth Forum, an interdisciplinary research laboratory open to young people between 14 and 25 years old. B-YOUth Forum is promoted by the University of Milano-Bicocca as part of the MUSA (Multilayered Urban Sustainability Action) project, funded by the Ministry of University and Research within the framework of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan. B-YOUth Forum wanted to find out how and where participatory research with young people is being carried out around the world, which topics are being investigated, and which tools are being experimented. This in order to get inspired by what is happening around the world but also to enter in dialogue with other researchers and practices. Therefore, the decision to map out participatory research practices. As will be discussed more in-depth in the methodological section of the paper, but that is important to state right from the beginning, the review was not conducted only by professional researchers[2] but also by a youth researcher part of B-YOUth Forum. This is a crucial element for bringing young people closer to scientific research and the underlying processes of knowledge construction and sharing.

2. Research approach

The research question addressed in this review is What are the key dimensions of youth participatory research in out-of-school contexts?

This review used systematic processes based on a PRISMA protocol (Page *et al.*, 2021) to frame the concept of 'participatory research' in educational contexts other than schools. Academic peer-reviewed research was searched.

2 In the article, we define "professional researchers" as those who have been in the profession for several years, while "youth researchers" refers to young research participants, who are for all intents and purposes co-researchers but who are not formally professionals.

Selected for their relevance to participatory research with young people, EBSCO and ProQuest ERIC databases were searched. The review did not refer to a specific period, including papers to the year 2023. To identify records of interest, we entered search terms using the Boolean operators AND/OR/NOT, using asterisks to truncate the search terms. Drawing on the methodology used by Anyon, Bender, Kennedy and Dechants (2018) in order to study the state of youth participatory action research, our search criteria included terms associated with the study population and search terms associated with intervention and search terms associated with study methods (Tab. 1).

Research criteria	**Separated by OR**
Study population	"young people" OR "emerging adult" OR youth OR minor* OR juvenile* OR adolescent* OR teen*
Terms associated (AND)	
Intervention	"youth voice" OR "youth organizing" OR "youth activism" OR "youth empower*" OR "youth leader*" OR "youth civic" OR "youth advoc*" OR "youth decision-making" OR "youth engage*" OR "youth advisory board" OR "youth advisory council" OR "youth action board" OR "youth action council" OR "youth community development" OR "youth involvement" OR "youth led" OR "youth council" OR "youth coalition" OR "youth outreach" OR "youth adult partner*" OR "youth commission" OR "youth forum" OR "youth parliament" OR "youth organization*" OR "youth participation"
Terms associated (AND)	
Study methods	"evidence-based" OR effective* OR intervention* OR outcome* OR "experimental stud*" OR "experimental design" OR "quasi-experiment*" OR "case stud*" OR "case-control stud*" OR "cross-sectional" OR "cohort stud*" OR "longitudinal inquiry" OR "meta-analysis" OR "secondary correlational data mining" OR observational OR ethnography OR "grounded theory" OR "narrative inquiry" OR phenomenol* OR feminist OR "promising practice*" OR "randomized control trial*" OR interview* OR qualitative OR survey OR focus group OR pre-experiment* OR evaluation OR "youth-led research" OR "youth participatory action research". We also used the boolean operator NOT "school" OR "tertiary education" OR "high-school" OR "college" OR "middle school" OR teacher* OR student* OR pupil*

Tab. 1: Research criteria and Terms associated

The eligibility criteria mainly concerned the following aspects: (1) characteristics of the study (empirical studies, issued in peer-reviewed and academic journals, published in English language); (2) population (subjects involved in the research studies included young people between the age of 14 and 30,

samples were excluded if they consisted of students only); (3) intervention (research-based studies that involved young people in the research design and/or data collection and/or analysis and/or interpretation and/or dissemination).

A study team consisting of a full professor, a researcher, one PhD student, and a civil servant ran the systematic search process, which was divided into two stages. The criteria for eligibility were established, and the researcher, the PhD student and civil servant were involved in searching, screening, and coding the studies. The full professor provided scientific oversight as part of the procedure. Phase 1 comprised preliminary screening of the titles and abstracts to see if they fulfilled the original criteria after doing electronic searches using the databases and search terms given. Our search turned up 582 studies; 7 duplicate records were removed; 401 records were eliminated due to lack of compliance with the established criteria. In cases where the abstracts lacked sufficient information, the articles were kept and sent on to Phase 2. Phase 2 involved retrieving full-text articles and determining if they still met the first screening standards, keeping 27 articles.

NVivo 13 was used to document, code, and organise the independent codings from each researcher. Based on the research question and the PRISMA guidelines, an a priori codebook was developed. The team then tested this codebook with the 27 selected articles. The researchers met weekly to discuss codebook discrepancies and to agree on divergent code answers (Fig. 1).

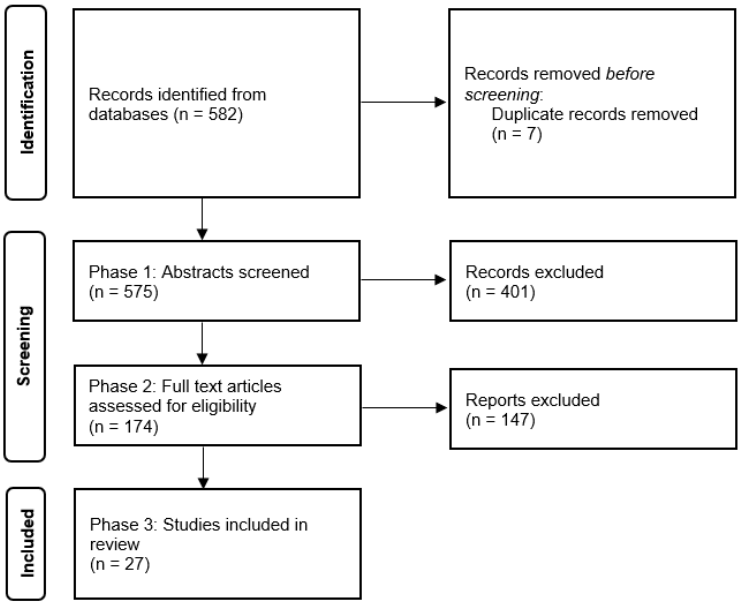

Fig. 1: Identification and screening of the review sample. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page *et al.*, 2021).

In order to investigate how to design and implement participatory research with young people, data items that reflect the structure of a research were defined.

Therefore, the papers were coded based on: 1) the type of participatory research that was conducted; 2) the research focus and themes; 3) the research context; 4) the duration of research project; 5) sampling, characteristics and engagement of the youth researchers; 6) ethical issues; 7) how the project developed (phases, timing etc.); 8) research tools; 9) the roles of the involved subjects, therefore academic researchers, young people and other participants; 10) impact of the research on involved subjects.

3. Results

3.1 Types of participatory research

In the reviewed articles there is not only a very wide variety of different typologies of participatory research with young people, but also a diversity of ways of defining it, often even within the same article (Tab.2).

Types of research	Number of research
Community based participatory research	6
Youth-led research	3
Youth-led participatory action research	3
Action research involving young people	3
Participatory research design	1

Tab. 2: Types of research and Number of research

The remaining five articles presented *participatory research with young people* but without providing specific definitions.

3.2 Research Focus and Themes

The analyzed papers encompass a broad spectrum of subjects, concerning issues related to youth empowerment, racial segregation, social justice, health, community development, and beyond. Follows a comprehensive exploration of these topics.

- *Health and Well-being:* A selection of references concentrates on the health and well-being of young individuals, addressing topics such as adolescent pregnancy and parenthood (Levac, 2013; Pfeiffer, 2013), adolescent obesity (Livingood *et al.*, 2016), HIV prevention (Wilson *et al.*, 2019; Yang & MacEntee, 2015), tobacco consumption (Lee *et al.*, 2013), and mental health (Barranza & Bartigs, 2017).

- *Social and Ecological Justice:* Social and environmental justice is another theme that is addressed (four articles). McIver (2020) examines the impact of geographical context in shaping the identities of activists committed to social and environmental justice. Meanwhile, the YouCreate project (Lee *et al.*, 2020) aims to improve the participation experiences of migrant and adversity-affected adolescents, thereby improving their well-being, empowering them, and increasing their societal engagement, including participation in decision-making processes. Kimball (2005) brings in girls' perspective to programme evaluation through participatory research design. Iwasaki, Springett, and Dashora (2014) provide a participatory action research-based paradigm for youth engagement with a focus on positive youth development and social justice. The study discusses the framework's foundations, objectives, and procedures in depth, underlining the crucial role of youth leaders in its development.
- *Discrimination and Juvenile Justice:* Desai (2022) addresses racial bias and structural injustice in the context of juvenile justice. Similarly, Aldana, Richards-Schuster, et al. (2021) investigate the empowerment journey, which includes critical reflection and responses to racial segregation among youngsters.
- *Community Development and Social Infrastructure:* Heather Douglas (2006) provides a detailed case study illustrating the efforts of a youth-led organisation attempting to improve social infrastructure in resource-constrained areas. Whynot, Heat, Silver, et al. (2022) study is evaluative in nature, and it explores LGBTQ2S+ youth housing support while examining promising possibilities for both prevention and response measures. Growing Up in NYC (GUiNYC) is a Driskell (2007) initiative that involves young co-researchers in assessing their local milieu, identifying opportunities for transformation, and actively contributing to community betterment. This research focuses on the complexities of youth participation, emphasising issues like creating ownership, facilitating youth leadership, and providing engaging research activities. The acknowledgement of organisational elements and sustained commitments as critical for effective participatory action research is central to its results. Mathiyazhagan and Siva's (2020) inquiry delves into youth-driven visual technology and media-based community development, accentuating the viability of a grassroots youth-led approach to communal betterment. Additionally, Gomez and Ryan's (2016) exploration navigates the realm of youth-led action research aimed at refining educational and recreational resources within a socioeconomically challenged neighbourhood. Lastly, Iwasaki and Yoshitaka (2015) present a multi-year community-based research project on youth engagement, focusing on the themes of "Why engage?", "How do we engage?", and "What impacts are we having?" It de-

scribes strategic youth and partner engagement and highlights the significance of involving youth leaders and community partners in the research process.

- *Focus on the use of specific research tools:* Lile and Richards (2018) addresses the use of peer interviews as a participative method in a gardening and microenterprise programme for low-income teenagers. It emphasises the advantages of peer interviewing, such as adolescent participation, shared learning, and the development of critical social consciousness. The research highlights the value of peer interviews in participatory research and evaluation programmes. Handy, Rodgers and Schwieterman, (2011) study examines youth asset mapping as a participatory action research tool to assess community assets and youth involvement opportunities. It explores youth empowerment and their experiences with adult partners. The study emphasises the importance of understanding youth culture and facilitating youth engagement for effective participatory research.

3.3 Research Context and duration of research projects

When analysing the papers the researchers paid due attention to the research context, exploring whether the research took place in urban areas or in rural ones and in which geographical areas, as the context impacts on many dimensions of participants such as constraints and possibilities, meanings, policies and so on. Only twelve studies were explicit about these aspects. Nine projects took place in *urban or metropolitan cities* and two in *rural areas or small towns*, while one study took place both in an urban and rural area.

The *duration* of research projects is not always clearly described in the reviewed articles. Five articles do not specify the project time frame at all, in only three cases giving some indication of e.g. the number of meetings and their duration in terms of hours (Tab. 3).

Duration of research projects	Number of research
Less than a week	1
Between four months and one year	6
One year or more	2
Two years or more years	3
Three years or more years	5
More than six years	1

Tab. 3: Duration of research projects and Number of research

In addition to the duration, nine articles also refer to the specific *frequency of meetings* (Tab. 4). In particular, one article of these nine articles refers to both weekly and monthly meetings on different aspects of research.

Frequency of meetings	Number of research
Every day	1
Two meetings per week	1
Weekly meetings	4
One to two meetings per month	1
Monthly meetings	2

Tab. 4: Frequency of meetings and Number of research

3.4 Sampling, characteristics and engagement of youth researchers

3.4.1 Sampling

Eleven studies include participants that are both under and over the age of 18. The youngest are aged 14 and the oldest 25. Three studies involve only people under the age of 18, with the youngest being 11 and the oldest 17. One study does not report the specific age but the school level, so juniors in high-school. The rest of the studies are not specific about the ages of the participants.

The average number of involved participants is 28,69; the lowest reported number of participants is 4 (Mclver, 2020); the highest reported number of participants is over 140 (Driskell, 2007).

In the various examined articles, sampling is not described in detail, except in three articles, where explicit reference is made to *purposeful sampling* (two articles) and *convenience sampling* (one article). In two articles, reference is also made to *snowball sampling* in addition to the above-mentioned sampling techniques.

Selection

Even if specific sampling techniques are not always mentioned, some papers report various *criteria used for sample selection*, based on the type of research they conducted, such as McIver (2020) who selects participants based on their commitment to activism for social and ecological justice. Another article (Iwasaki *et al.*, 2014) mentions young people with relevant qualifications (e.g., interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills), different experiences (e.g., homelessness, foster care, abusive behaviour) and who are connected to and trusted by local youth communities. Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) chose to involve four youth groups that had a history of working together and thus would be comfortable with

each other and their facilitator. Douglas (2006) invited some young people he knew who had particular personal and family issues to participate in connection with the research that wanted to facilitate improvements in an area with poor social infrastructure. Four papers further explicitly select participants according to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, geographic location and vulnerable categories of youth, such as youth affected by violence, Aboriginal and immigrant youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

In seven articles reference is made to an actual *selection process* rather than sampling. It is therefore young people who apply to participate in the research. In particular, Pfeiffer (2013) describes an essay writing competition, where selection criteria were the overall quality of the essay and reflectivity shown in the texts. Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2021) make it explicit that no formal selection process was employed, and that the programme accepted all youth who volunteered. In the research by Flicker *et al.* (2019) a call for applications was circulated, while in the study by Lile and Richards (2018) recruitment occurred on a first-come/first-served basis. In most cases, however, neither the application procedure nor the selection criteria adopted are specified.

Recruitment

As we have noted, young people were engaged in different ways. In particular, with regard to the context and the modes of engagement, some areas of interest can be identified. In four papers, researchers involved *teachers and school headmasters* in order to engage young people. Two of these studies also made use of *word of mouth*. In two papers specific reference is made to *community centres*. Lee *et al.* (2020) mention, for example, that a public call-out was placed in their community centres, while Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) decided to include some groups of young people, two of which were based out of community centres. Desai (2002) refers to *juvenile reporting centres* as places where young people were recruited through court specialty programmes. Recruitment through *youth specific programmes* is also mentioned in four reviewed articles. In this regard, Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, (2021) report how the first youth team was created to meet the interest of summer youth dialogue participants who wanted to continue addressing issues of race in their communities and how it continues to attract young people who participate in their summer programmes and want to continue working together. Iwasaki (2015) describes their youth team as having been identified and recruited by their community *agency partners* that provide local youth programmes. Iwasaki *et al.* (2014) also refer to recruitment and selection by partners from ten agencies (including provincial and municipal government agencies, provincial health systems, local school systems, multicultural community organisations, and nonprofit youth agencies) that serve high-risk and at-risk youth, and that identified and recommended youth participants. Kimball (2005) speakers of participants coming from a specific youth

programme addressed to girls. Only one article refers to the use of *social media*. In particular, Lee, et al. (2020) describe how a call was posted on social media channels in Egypt and Iraq and how interested youth applied. One article refers to the *academic-community partnership*, which included religious organisations, and social service agencies dedicated to high-risk youth, gender empowerment, or focused on reducing health problems with adolescents (Livingood *et al.*, 2017).

Compensation

On the other hand, with regard to the *compensation* of young people, only in four articles reviewed explicitly refer to it. Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2021), and Livingood et al. (2017) mention *voluntary participation* of young people. On the other hand, Levac (2013) describes how youths who chose to participate were offered *course credit,* while Gomez and Ryan (2016) report on an actual *employment* of young participants.

3.5 Ethical issues

Ethical considerations are crucial across the reviewed studies, with eight of them explicitly addressing ethical issues. Seven studies elucidate their procedures for obtaining participant consent, while one places particular emphasis on participants' acquisition of ethical awareness.

Several key themes emerged as recurring ethical principles that cut across the analyzed papers:

Emphasis on voluntary participation: an overarching emphasis on voluntary participation prevails, entailing the activation of youth assent processes (Barranza &Bartigs, 2017; Wilson, Monchalin *et al.*, 2019). Ensuring participants' autonomy, the studies underscore the significance of obtaining consent, often involving parents or guardians in the consent process (Pfeiffer, 2013). Additionally, the notion of consent and negotiation is underscored as an ongoing process (Wilson *et al.*, 2019).

Guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality: A paramount concern across the studies is the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality for participants (Aldana *et al.*, 2021). This pivotal ethical principle reflects the commitment to safeguarding participants' identities and maintaining their privacy.

Emphasis on transparent communication with stakeholders: Transparent communication emerges as a cornerstone of ethical practice, highlighted by the studies (Barranza & Bartigs, 2017). This principle underscores the necessity of clear and open dialogue with stakeholders, affirming their roles and responsibilities within the research process.

Participants choosing to waive anonymity and requesting their real names and likenesses to be shared: one salient aspect pertains to participants exercising their autonomy in choosing to waive anonymity. Notably, in the study by Wilson, Monchalin, Oliver *et al.* (2019), participants opt to share their real names and likenesses, reflecting a conscious decision to be more visibly associated with the research outcomes.

Participants learning about ethics: Levac (2013: 432) reports: "In preparing for the interviews, we practiced asking the questions, and used a scenario-based activity to explore research ethics. I posed plausible ethical scenarios, and we discussed potential responses. I created the scenarios based on concerns that participants raised throughout the research process. For example: 'You are doing an interview with someone, and you learn during the interview that she is now dating someone who you know has a girlfriend. What do you do?' Such a situation was possible given our small community, where degrees of social separation are limited". Gomez, Ryan (2016: 287) also mentions that young people were trained, before interviewing about "[…] confidentiality, informed consent, basic research methods, methods for building rapport, use of digital voice recorders, and group dynamics. Livingood (2017) underlines the importance of an introduction to research ethics, including, given the photovoice method used in the research, the need to protect the rights of the people photographed and the need to obtain their consent.

Approval of the research protocol by an ethical committee or discussion of parts of the research process with stakeholders: The validation of research protocols by ethical committees or engagement with stakeholders regarding key aspects of the research process surfaces as a key ethical pillar (Aldana *et al.*, 2021; Levac, 2013). This underscores the recognition of the importance of external validation and the acknowledgment of stakeholders' roles in shaping the ethical landscape of the research.

3.6 Development of the research project

The analysed papers outline various steps of implementation that can be categorised into common project implementation phases: initiation of the project, data collection and analysis, dissemination.

Initiation of the project

Preparation of the study encompasses a multifaceted approach that involves several key components. First and foremost, establishing relationships with participants is highlighted as crucial for fostering trust, a fundamental element in participatory research, as emphasized by Levac (2013). Moreover, planning and preparation involve meticulous organization and engagement strategies. For instance, Aldana *et al.* (2021) conducted group discussions aimed at critical self-reflection to identify social issues of interest before initiating the photo-voice tour. In Mclver's (2020) study, two introductory workshops were conducted to equip participants with critical research skills, familiarize them with interview techniques, and introduce the project's conceptual framework. Similarly, Kimball (2005) organized training weeks focusing on data collection and analysis methods, providing participants with the necessary tools and knowledge to engage effectively in the research process. Overall, preparation of the study involves proactive measures aimed at establishing rapport, fostering critical think-

ing, and equipping participants with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute meaningfully to the research endeavor.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis in research entail a systematic process encompassing various methodologies and approaches.

Firstly, developing research questions involves collaborative efforts and meticulous attention to topics of interest, as highlighted in Levac's (2013) study, where the process took more than a month of discussion and note-taking. Subsequently, diverse methods such as documentation review, field notes, participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and creative workshops are employed to gather data, as demonstrated in studies by Handy, Rodgers, Schwieterman (2011), Mclver (2020), Desai (2022), Gomez, Ryan (2016), Kimball (2005), and others. Following data collection, various analysis methods are employed depending on the research questions. For instance, Levac (2013) utilized thematic content analysis, breaking down the process into digestible steps for participants and discussing examples to facilitate understanding. Similarly, Aldana, Richards-Schuster *et al.* (2021) employed photovoice analysis, where team members individually analyzed photographs taken during the tour and reflected on their significance. The process involved both individual and collective analysis, emphasizing the depth and breadth of data analysis techniques utilized in research endeavors. Overall, data collection and analysis encompass a comprehensive and structured approach aimed at deriving meaningful insights and addressing research objectives effectively.

Dissemination

Different approaches concerning dissemination of findings have been highlighted in the review. Specifically, Aldana, Richards-Schuster *et al.* (2021) study mentions that, as part of the team's collective efforts to share findings with community members, an art exhibit was organised. It allowed visitors to "tour" the investigated avenue as experienced by the team. Kimball (2005) reports the project concluding with a Power Point presentation organised by the participants. Pfeiffer (2013) describes the implementation of dissemination workshops where the created videos concerning teenage pregnancy were shown and discussed with representatives of government institutions, national and international NGOs as well as donors. Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) present the last action of the youth teams, the presentation of the project results at a local research conference, the 2003 Child and Youth Health Conference.

3.7 Research tools

3.7.1 Research tools used by youth researchers

A pivotal aspect of the present review encompassed the mapping and analysis of the diverse array of research tools used by youth researchers.

The focal point of this exploration lies in understanding the methodologies these youth researchers adopted to glean insights from their respective contexts. These narrative endeavors to distill these research tools into thematic categories, exploring the methodological nuances underlying each approach.

A. Focus group: The analyzed papers illuminate multifaceted approaches employed by young participants in conducting focus group sessions. Notable instances include Desai's (2022) exploration, where four focus group interviews were undertaken with system-involved youth within detention centers. Similarly, Mathiyazhagan, Siva (2020) engaged distinct demographic groups – youth (15-25 years), parents (25-40 years), and community elders (45-60 years) – in separate focus group discussions. White et al (2012) reports the conduction of four focus groups, each consisting of five informants. Each group met for a class period of nearly an hour. Flip charts were used to record responses to predetermined questions. In order not to create discomfort and distress among participants, risking inhibiting dialogue: video and audio recordings were not made and facial expressions, body language, dress, and identity were not part of the assessments. Livingood et al. (2017) report that four youth facilitators were trained and conducted focus groups. Youth facilitators followed a focus group interview guide developed by the research team in collaboration with the youth. This guide was then revised after three focus group sessions. After the focus groups, the four youth facilitators were trained on and analyzed the focus groups.

B. Interviews: Interview methodologies serve as a cornerstone for eliciting narratives and delving into participants' experiences. The analysis of these methodologies unfolds multifaceted insights, from the planning and execution of interviews to their subsequent analysis.

- *Research Objective and Data Collection:* Authors such as Levac (2013) and Aldana, Richards-Schuster *et al.* (2021) emphasize the need to define the research objectives that guide the interviews. Participants' identification of research objectives, such as understanding young parents' experiences or gathering thoughts about a metropolitan region, serves as the basis for conducting interviews. Semi-structured interviews are employed for data collection, and in some cases, handwritten notes are taken rather than audio-recording the interviews.
- *Ethical Considerations:* Levac (2013) highlights the importance of reflecting on ethical considerations in interview preparation. Through the construction of plausible ethical scenarios and subsequent discussions on potential responses, a dedication to upholding research ethics is manifested.
- *Participant Engagement and Ownership:* McIver (2020) and Lile, Richards (2018) emphasize the proactive involvement of participants in shaping the interview process. Participants actively con-

tribute to discussions and decision-making concerning diverse facets of interviews, including the modus operandi, location, and question formulation. The overarching theme of participant engagement resonates with a sense of ownership and empowerment, thereby shaping the contours of the research endeavor.

- *Interview Training and Guidance:* Gomez, Ryan (2016) Kimball (2005) and Mathiyazhagan, Siva (2020) foreground the pivotal role of training and guidance for interviewers. The training sessions encompass a spectrum of skills, from foundational interview techniques to nuanced ethical considerations. The scholars emphasize the researchers' role in furnishing comprehensive training and skill enhancement for interviewers, ensuring their adeptness and preparedness.
- *Peer-to-Peer Interviews and Collaboration:* The concept of peer-to-peer interviews emerges from several authors, including Gomez, Ryan (2016) and Lile, Richards (2018). Peer researchers are trained to conduct interviews, fostering a collaborative approach where peers interact with participants. This theme underscores the value of peer involvement in data collection.
- *Analysis and Theme Identification:* The theme of analysis and thematic identification permeates various references, such as Levac (2013), Lile, Richards (2018) and Kimball (2005), who also reports training participants on how to do this. Scholars expound upon the process of thematic content analysis, wherein recurring ideas and patterns are distilled from the interview narratives. Participants' active role in identifying and shaping themes is acknowledged, underscoring the significance of their contributions even beyond formal data coding.
- *Reflexivity and Iteration:* Excerpts from the works suggest a reflexive and iterative approach, wherein researchers and participants mutually engage in reflection and adjustment. Levac (2013) and Driskell (2007) spotlight instances of both challenges and moments of excitement, highlighting the dynamic learning process inherent in refining the interview methodology.

These themes collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of interviews in research, encompassing ethical considerations, participant engagement, training, analysis, and collaborative approaches. Each author's perspective contributes to a richer understanding of how interviews are conducted and utilized in various research contexts.

C. Survey: London's (2007) work presents a team of high school students, known as the "Social Investigators" that designed, administered, analyzed, and reported the results of a survey on youth experiences and aspirations in the SOMA neighborhood. They conducted 194 surveys with young people aged 5 to 18.

D. Observations: the SEAYL participants conducted observations at 25 tobacco product-selling stores in Richmond, California. The stores

were selected based on proximity to schools, homes, and the project office. The participants recorded data about visible tobacco advertisements, promotional items, self-service tobacco access, signs, and other relevant factors inside and outside the stores.

E. Arts-based and visual approaches: The analysis of selected papers brought forth a spectrum of artistic and visual methodologies championed by young participants.

- *Photovoice methodologies:* Aldana, Richards-Schuster *et al.* (2021): engaged in a photovoice project involving young people in a collective photovoice tour to document segregation in metropolitan Detroit. The 2007 MYPF team engaged in a photovoice project to address race-related issues in metropolitan Detroit. During this tour, youth took photographs to document segregation across the region, focusing on aspects such as housing conditions, neighborhood racial composition, communal spaces, and geographical boundaries. In addition to the photovoice tour, the study used a windshield survey, which involved a visual assessment of conditions in the community based on predetermined criteria. The survey allowed participants to document physical and social aspects of segregation in metropolitan Detroit. After the tour and survey, the MYPF team analyzed the gathered information to identify issues and develop an action plan. The program concluded with opportunities for collective action and policy advocacy based on the collected data. Similarly, Lee, Lipperman-Kreda *et al.* (2013) involved youth participants in PhotoVoice projects to collect images from neighbourhoods. Photos were taken to document smoking-related issues and differences between positive and negative neighbourhoods. Participants discussed and developed descriptions to accompany selected images. In subsequent discussions and written narratives, youth participants analyzed the collected images to document exposures to various tobacco-related products targeted towards youth, such as mentholated tobacco products and other items appealing to young people. In Livingood *et al.* (2017) study youth researchers received training in photovoice methods, which included research ethics and instructions for taking photos, writing reflections, and uploading photo data. Participants took photos of what they thought contributed to obesity and posted them through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and via email.
- *Youth Video Project:* Yang, MacEntee (2015): Utilized participatory video-making where youth participants used cellphones to create videos. The process included brainstorming, storyboarding, shooting videos, reviewing, revising, and sharing messages with peers.
- *Visual SWOT Process:* Mathiyazhagan, Siva (2020): Conducted a visual Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) process where youth and community members shared their community's attributes and challenges in front of the camera. This process involved visual documentation and active community participation.

- *Arts-Based Activities:* Lee, Currie *et al.* (2020) describe Youth leaders and peers used arts-based activities to map out project baselines, roles, and visions. This method facilitated exploration of well-being, community involvement, and engagement with the arts.

3.7.2 Research tools used by professional researchers

Specularly to the tools used by youth researchers, the professional researchers engaged in using a series of more 'traditional' research tools and artistic ones.

- For what concerns the traditional ones, they include:
- Review of documentation (Handy, Rodgers, Schwieterman, 2011)
- Field notes (Mclver, 2020; Desai, 2022)
- Participant observations (Levac, 2013)
- Interviews (Levac, 2013; Desai, 2022; Gomez, Ryan, 2016; Handy, Rodgers, Schwieterman, 2011; Mclver, 2020)
- Researchers' reflections, also in the form of journals (Desai, 2022)
- Community mapping (Amsden, VanWynsberghe, 2005).

The researchers also engage with non-traditional tools, such as the arts-based ones.

In Levac, 2013, the researcher is engaged in facilitating creative and arts-based workshops with participants. The researcher collaborates with three artists to conduct mask-making, screen printing, and photography workshops. Participants use these artistic activities, particularly mask-making, as a means to explore their identities and express themselves. The researcher utilizes the masks as a tool for communication, allowing participants to convey aspects of their identities without having to explicitly speak about their personal details. This arts-based approach is employed as part of Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) strategies.

In Yang, MacEntee, 2015, the researchers focus on analyzing visual materials and participants' interactions within different contexts. They draw on analytical schemes developed by previous researchers, such as Rogers *et al.* (2010) and Rose (2007). The researchers examine the production of images, the content of the images themselves, and the ways in which audiences engage with these images. Additionally, they analyze how participants articulate their positions on various topics through verbal and visual means, both within the production process and in the final products. This study uses a visual methodology to explore positioning and how it evolves across different stages of image creation and consumption.

3.8 Role of 'professional researchers' and 'youth researchers'

In the reviewed papers, the roles and activities of the research participants were not always clearly described. In particular, the different roles of "professional researchers", "youth researchers" and both together were

identified. Other participants who supported the different research projects in a marginal way were also identified.

3.8.1 Role of 'professional researchers'

In eight articles, the role of 'professional researchers' emerges and is described in different ways. In fact, researchers took on different roles, depending on the research project and the project phases. Predominantly, researchers assumed a training role with respect to the conduct of the research or with respect to certain themes or specific aspects of the project; they also took on a role of observation and support in the different phases of the research project.

- *Research training:* Five articles describe the role of 'professional researchers' as research trainers. For example, Levac (2013) describes how researchers organised a workshop on methods to give participants mini experiences with the various research tools they could use (e.g. interviews, focus groups, photovoice). In particular, three articles focused on interview training. In particular, Levac (2013) describes how researchers proposed a workshop to develop interview questions, explaining the aims and principles of the interview process and providing participants with examples of interview formats and questions. Gomez and Ryan (2016) describe how a researcher experienced in research methods and working with young people conducted a workshop to train 'youth researchers' to conduct individual interviews. Lile and Richards (2018) also describe how the entire group participated in a workshop on effective interviewing strategies. One article (Desai, 2022) also describes how the 'professional researcher' taught the young people how to code data and search for themes. In another article (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005), the actions performed by the researchers are not described in detail, but it is emphasised that the aim of the 'professional researchers' was to build the research skills of the young participants.
- *Policy skills training:* In addition to research training, one paper (Aldana, Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2021) refers to specific training with respect to the development of policy skills. Thus, policy training workshops were offered, which also included activities to prepare them for public speaking with policymakers, such as practice panel discussions, legislative meeting role-plays and roundtable discussions.
- *Observation:* One article describes how "professional researchers" took on the role of observers during some phases of the project (Pfeiffer, 2013).
- *Guidance and support:* Five articles expound upon the pivotal role assumed by researchers as guides and sources of support throughout various phases of research endeavors. Douglas (2006) delineates his multifaceted involvement in all stages of a research project, rang-

ing from project initiation to group establishment, conceptualization and realization of objectives, proposition of suggestions, intermediary representation between the group and external entities, and insulation against extraneous influences. Notably, Douglas underscores that the primary agency rested with the "youth researchers". Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) similarly elucidate their task of formulating project objectives and crafting an initial research plan, predicated upon the presumption that forthcoming "youth researchers" would ultimately determine the project's trajectory. Levac (2013) recounts his comprehensive support of the "youth researchers" throughout the project lifecycle. This encompassed meticulous documentation of topics arising during weekly sessions, encouragement for participants to log inter-session ideas, and facilitation in refining their research inquiries. Collaborative endeavors between professional researchers and youth researchers in shaping interview content are expounded upon by Mclver (2020) and Lile and Richards (2018). Desai (2022) and Lee, Lipperman-Kreda *et al.* (2013) also delineate instances of such joint efforts in crafting surveys. Two of the reviewed articles spotlight instances where "professional researchers'" provided facilitative support for discussions and focus groups. Pfeiffer (2013) and Gomez and Ryan (2016) expound upon the research team's roles in moderating and guiding discussions. Paralleling, White *et al.* (2012) emphasize the diminishing attendance of the adult mentor within the group's meetings, positing that the mentor's presence inadvertently stifled novel idea generation due to the lack of contestation for the mentor's propositions. The collaborative involvement of both professional and youth researchers in evaluative projects is evident, as demonstrated by Driskell (2007) in the context of evaluation initiatives and in the establishment of youth-led activities, such as youth councils, as elaborated by Barranza and Bartigs (2017). Pfeiffer (2013) further accentuates the role of professional researchers in mediating interactions between youth researchers and camera team professionals, fostering a harmonious collaboration within the research project. Levac (2013) additionally expounds upon the researcher's role in systematizing the analytical process into comprehensible steps for the participants. In summation, Whynot, Heat, Silver *et al.* (2022) succinctly convey the collaborative essence between professional researchers and youth researchers, characterized by co-creation, co-leadership, and co-evaluation.

3.8.2 Role of 'youth researchers'

Twenty of the articles reviewed describe in more or less detail the role of 'youth researchers' in the different research projects.

One article (Mathiyazhagan, 2020) does not provide a detailed description of the role of the 'youth researchers', although it is mentioned

that they conducted a visual SWOT of the community. With regard to the other papers, a number of research activities have been identified which the 'youth researchers' worked on. Furthermore, another article (Douglas, 2006) specifies that young people made all the decisions, did all the work and took responsibility for the direction and results of the project. One paper highlights how YPAR members are both researchers and participants and co-owners of the knowledge production process (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017).

- *Setting the agenda for planning meetings:* Iwasaki (2014; 2015) describes how young people not only participated in the planning meetings, but how they also set the agenda. In addition, between meetings the young people had some useful homework, such as researching various approaches used by local youth agencies and preparing to contribute to the next session by answering specific questions designed to facilitate dialogue on the agenda items for the next meeting.
- *Definition of research topics/objectives:* Four articles detail the participation of young people with respect to the definition of research topics (Driskell, 2007; London, 2007; White *et al.*, 2012) and research objectives (Levac, 2013).
- *Research question development:* Only one article (Levac, 2013) refers to the development of research questions by the 'youth researchers'.
- *Development and implementation of research tools:* Two articles describe how youth developed and implemented research tools, such as interviews (Lile & Richards, 2018), focus groups (Livingood *et al.*, 2017), a survey and a photovoice project among youth (Barraza, Bartgis and Fresno Native Youth Council, 2017).
- *Research data collection:* In six of the articles reviewed it is emphasised how young people collected research data. Four articles do not describe how the data were collected by 'youth researchers' (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Levac, 2013; Desai, 2022). In three other articles, however, how the research data were gathered is outlined, referring to the research instruments that were used. In particular, Lile and Richards (2018) specify how fifteen of the 'youth researchers' conducted the interview process. Handy, Rodgers and Schwieterman (2011) point out how the young people interviewed peers and adults to explore work opportunities and places where young people can engage in positive activities within their community. Livingood *et al.* (2017) describe how 'youth researchers' used photovoice methods and conducted focus groups.
- *Research data analysis:* In only three articles is it mentioned that young people analysed data, but without describing the process in detail (Levac, 2013; Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Livingood *et al.*, 2017).
- *Realisation of a research artefact:* Two papers refer to the realisation of artefacts by 'youth researchers'. In particular, Levac (2013)

describes how they wrote and acted out a film. Also, in the second paper (Pfeiffer, 2013), the young people decided to represent the key themes of the research through a film, thinking carefully about the stories, places and characters portrayed in it, so that they would be representative for themselves and their peers. After agreeing on a common script, the young people assigned the different parts to each other, based on the personalities and characteristics of the characters in the film, so that they were as consistent as possible with the real life of their group.

- *Research results presentation/dissemination:* Eight of the articles emphasise how the 'youth researchers' presented the research results and played a leading role in the dissemination of the project. Kimball (2005) describes the importance of creating and sharing a PowerPoint presentation as a crucial part of the participatory process. Levac (2013) points out that they presented the results of their research through various artefacts, including a film performance and the presentation of some photos of the masks and poems they had written during the art workshops. Also in another article, an exhibition was organised (Aldana, Richards-Schuster & Checkoway, 2021), where the young people were responsible for inviting members of their community and presented and discussed the project with them. Some young people stated that this event was their first opportunity to share their expertise with peers and adults outside their community. In two other articles, some young people made videos. Yang and MacEntee (2015) describe how young people made a video production and then organised a screening event in their school. In the other paper (Flicker *et al.*, 2019), young people organised screening evenings of some of their stories, which they chose. These evenings were an opportunity to talk about their work as HIV leaders, what it was like to make these films and to show their work, also answering open questions. In addition, some young people organised second and third screenings at local, regional and national meetings and conferences. One paper points out that some young people are the authors of the paper (White *et al.*, 2012). Douglas (2006) describes how the young people decided to organise a concert as an opportunity to promote the project to attract other young people. They also organised a political forum with the presence of local politicians to answer questions from local young people. Another article also refers to engaging in dialogue with political institutions. In fact, Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2021) describe how young people attended a conference with some political representatives and how the youth expressed their concerns to them, calling for changes in school funding inequalities, public transport and reinvestment strategies.
- *Recommendations Implementation:* In three articles reviewed, young people developed some recommendations. Levac (2013) re-

ports how young people developed recommendations concerning young parents' experiences with child protection and housing. Desai (2022) also explains how the young people implemented recommendations from the results of the research project. Iwasaki (2015) says how one of the main outcomes was the development by young people of a framework for youth engagement. This framework was then tested on an experimental basis with locally recruited young people. Finally, Kimball (2005) how their study provides new ideas for programming from girls' perspectives.

3.9 Benefits and challenges for youth researchers

When analysing the studies, we searched for benefits and challenges those young participants encountered while taking part in a participatory research project.

- *Increased efficacy, unforeseen positive outcomes but permaining structural challenges:* Levac (2013) reports an increase in participants' leader and collective efficacy, but ongoing structural challenges hindered their external political efficacy. So does Kimball (2005) stress the development of leadership and decision-making competences but underlines that scheduling meetings and so on was difficult due to the high intensity workload of the project. Social exclusion and prejudice persisted. The study mentions that in many instances, young mothers' experiences and expertise were not taken seriously by government officials, professors, or landladies. Other studies Whynot, Heat, Silver *et al.* (2022) mention that their project led to a form of stakeholder interest, accountability and real-time evaluation use that was unforeseen.
- *'Aging out' and need for rolling recruitment:* Livingood *et al.* (2017) report that one challenge that emerged from working with young people was 'ageing'. Indeed, as the 'youth researchers' graduated or approached high school graduation, many stopped participating. As this challenge emerged, the need for a continuous recruitment process became apparent to replace young people who left for university, moved away from the area or were simply no longer interested in participating.
- *Disruption of isolation and working across differences:* Aldana, Richards-Schyster *et al.* (2021) mention that engaging in a photovoice project, with peers from diverse backgrounds, and taking action together, enabled the team to disrupt the racial isolation they experienced growing up. Through their collective action, team members also learned how to work across differences.
- *Strengthening communities and social justice:* Desai (2022) reports an outcome of the project being strengthened communities and contribution to the broader struggle for social justice by combating institutional oppression. Moreover, the study mentsion that youth developed a critically conscious sociopolitical identity, engaged in

critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action through youth organizing and YPAR.

- *Sense of purpose and hope for the future:* Lee, Currie *et al.* (2020) speakers of young participants gaming a sense of purpose and hope for the future. They, in fact, underline how their skills have developed. The author argues that enhancing youth's future orientation creates space for youth to contribute meaningfully to both personal and community spaces, heightening their ability to experience meaningful participation and their capacity to exhibit 'strategic agency'.
- *Promoting change:* Youth-led initiatives can result in tangible benefits both for youth themselves and for their communities, contributing to positive change and capacity building, like Iwasaki and Yoshitaka (2015) underline. Furthermore, Yang and MacEntee (2015) suggest that youth-led video making may offer an effective way of supporting young people to talk openly about their interests and concerns. Amsden and VanWynsberghe (2005) report that the youth researchers were eager to start acting and so decided to use the mapping results to create a health service evaluation survey.
- *Learning and skill development:* Participants learned valuable lessons from practical project experiences, developed decision-making skills, and gained ownership of project goals. To this end, Douglas and Heather (2006) say that participants, although they made some mistakes, they learned a great deal from the reality of the project. They had the opportunity to apply theory to a practical situation like planning and staging an event. The participants say that the responsibility of making their own decisions was exciting, and it increased their ownership of the project, since they were accountable for the goals they had set. Therefore, the authors of the paper underline that each participant has subsequently benefited from the experience for their employment and future capacity to contribute to activities. White *et al.* (2012) argue that participants recognize the need to perform to gain important social science research skills. The research youth conduct must have meaning to them and practical use for their youth and adult contemporaries.

4. Conclusions

The literature review has illuminated participatory research with young people as a comprehensive concept encompassing diverse methodologies and approaches. It encourages intergenerational cooperation, facilitating the exchange of competences and perspectives between adults and young individuals, fostering shared ownership and empowerment within the research process. However, there are challenges and complexities associated

with the replicability of these approaches due to the lack of detailed descriptions in the reviewed articles. This poses a significant issue for researchers seeking to understand the fundamental principles of participatory research.

One notable observation is the broad spectrum of typologies and definitions of participatory research present in the reviewed literature. This diversity underscores the adaptability of participatory methods to various research contexts and topics, including health, social justice, discrimination, and juvenile justice. When participatory research projects tend to focus on topics that are relevant to the lives and communities of the participants, the research findings are more meaningful and actionable. This transformative tension is evident in the reviewed articles, as research projects aim to strengthen communities, advocate for policy changes, and promote social justice. By engaging young people in addressing complex issues affecting their lives, participatory research empowers them to become agents of change and contribute to a more equitable society. It equips them with essential skills like critical thinking, communication, and leadership, enriching their personal and professional growth and empowering them to contribute effectively to their communities and societies.

Additionally, the literature underscores the significance of visual and artistic research approaches such as photovoice and participatory videomaking, which resonate with young participants' lived experiences and enable authentic expressions, resulting in richer and more nuanced data.

Ethical considerations are paramount, with principles like voluntary participation, confidentiality, and transparent communication emphasized across reviewed studies. These principles underscore the importance of conducting research with integrity and respecting participants' rights and dignity, highlighting the need for further investigation into ethical considerations within participatory research.

Regarding duration, while project timelines are not always clearly delineated, it is evident that participatory research with young people necessitates significant time investments. Building trust, training young researchers, and fostering change with stakeholders all require considerable time, underlining the importance of sustained commitment and investment in participatory projects.

In conclusion, while urban areas have been the focus of many participatory research projects, there is a growing need to extend the reach of such studies to rural communities. Finally, adopting a participatory research approach in out-of-school contexts is of great value for the development of our societies, allowing us to reach and thus involve, but also train, all those girls and boys who for various reasons do not have access to school.

Contributo realizzato all'interno del progetto MUSA – Multilayered Urban Sustainability Action, finanziato dall'Unione Europea– NextGenerationEU, PNRR Missione 4 Componente 2 Linea di Investimento 1.5: Cre-

azione e rafforzamento degli "ecosistemi dell'innovazione", costruzione di "leader territoriali di R&S".

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