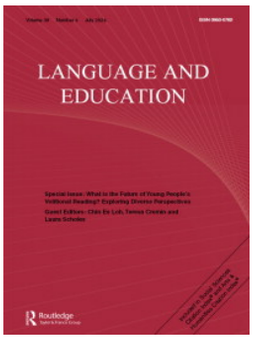

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Using participatory approaches with children and young people to research volitional reading

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ABSTRACT

Children and young people's volitional book reading has declined consistently over the last two decades, and research efforts to reverse this trajectory would benefit considerably from the input and insights of children and young people. Meanwhile, the expanding and intensifying role of technology in many children and young people's daily lives makes it difficult for adult reading researchers to stay informed and up-to-date on how technology is shaping and diversifying volitional reading practices and experiences. Participatory research approaches aim to break down the traditional barriers which exist between the researcher and the researched, creating inclusive, non-hierarchical relationships which support collaborative research, and draw upon the knowledge and experience of all involved. While there is growing interest in, and use of, participatory approaches in reading research, this is the first review, to the best of our knowledge, which focuses on participatory research approaches within the context of children and young people's reading. The aim of this review article is to a) summarise the principles, benefits, and methodological considerations associated with participatory approaches with children and young people, and b) describe different participatory reading research studies with children or young people, and reflect on how these can inform future research into volitional reading. This article aims to inform, support, and encourage the reading research community to consider adopting participatory principles and practices in their work (where appropriate), as we work collectively to enhance knowledge, thinking, and practice in relation to children and young people's volitional reading.

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Introduction

Improved understanding of children and young people's volitional (i.e. self-initiated) reading practices, and how we can extend and enhance these, is essential, given consistent reported declines in children and young people's volitional book reading, and the increasing role that technology plays in their literacy lives (Clark et al. 2023). In recent years, there has

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been growing interest in participatory approaches to literacy research, defined here as the involvement of children and/or young people in research in ways which seek to amplify their interests and priorities, and foreground their perspectives and experiences. When working in participatory ways, researchers aim to create mutually-beneficial and non-hierarchical collaborative relationships which are characterised by trust and quality communication, and which allow children/young people and adult researchers to work collaboratively and productively together to design, conduct, analyse, interpret and/or communicate research (Belone et al. 2016; Levac et al. 2019). Participatory approaches are underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12 (United Nations [UN] General Assembly 1989), which supports children and young people's expression of their own views and encourages their contribution towards decisions in matters that concern them.

Supporters of participatory approaches recognise that much academic research to date has failed to meaningfully include those for whom the research is about, or for whom the research is intended to benefit (Jacquez et al. 2013). Participatory research approaches may be particularly timely and important within the context of children and young people's volitional book reading, as recent research shows that levels of reading engagement and enjoyment have decreased consistently over the last decade, and are now at an all-time low (Clark et al. 2023). At the same time however, technology has enabled easier access to a wide range of reading materials available through different platforms and formats; young people's evolving volitional reading practices in these spaces needs to be better understood.

Implications of participatory research for volitional reading

Participatory research approaches may hold particular promise in understanding children and young people's volitional book reading. Many young people, particularly those from minority groups, often struggle to find books which represent their interests, lives and/or experiences, which can have consequences for their volitional book reading (Picton and Clark 2022). Furthermore, recent qualitative participatory research with young people has provided interesting insights into their perceptions of the barriers to volitional book reading, which include poor access to interesting/relevant books, a mismatch between their reading interests and book provision, negative portrayals of reading or being a reader by (social) media and/or peers, negative school-based reading experiences, negative reading affect/previous reading experiences, and/or a lack of time to read/other competing interests (Webber et al. 2023). Gaining these insights, in addition to understanding motivators to book reading, will be important if we are to work collectively to improve young people's perceptions of, and relationships with, books.

Participatory research approaches also hold promise for researchers interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the role of technology in children and young people's literacy lives, as they encounter and engage with diverse digital texts regularly (Turner et al., 2019). Participatory projects may provide insight into reading practices which are often less visible to adults, for example, fanfiction, defined as 'fan-authored texts which expand or reinvent worlds and characters from popular texts' (Duggan 2022, p. 704). Indeed, despite the popularity of fanfiction among many young people worldwide, this reading practice is not typically represented within research (for example, large-scale adult-developed surveys of children/young people's reading practices, e.g. the UK National Literacy Trust's Annual

Literacy Survey). To fully understand the breadth of children and young people's volitional reading practices and experiences, it is essential that all forms of research (from large-scale national surveys through to small-scale qualitative investigations) are informed by children and young people themselves.

This review article aims to a) summarise the principles, benefits, and methodological considerations associated with participatory approaches with children and young people, and b) review different research studies which have employed participatory approaches to study children and young people's reading experiences and practices. The article is intended to provide an accessible and informative overview for reading researchers new to participatory approaches, to illustrate how participatory approaches have been used previously to study children and young people's reading, and how this approach can be used to advance our investigations into, and understanding of, volitional reading.

Principles underpinning participatory research

Participatory research has a long tradition within Health and Social Care (e.g. Farr et al. 2020), Childhood and Youth Studies (e.g. Tisdall and Davis 2006) and community psychology and action research (Jacobs 2016; Levac et al. 2019) and participatory approaches have also been widely adopted in practice, for example, by children's rights advocates, critical educators, youth workers, and community organisers (Cahill 2007). Furthermore, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), where young people are empowered to take a leading role in research aligned with their own priorities is also relevant (Malorni et al. 2002). In this article we focus specifically on participatory research approaches as they relate to reading research, and within the context of University-led research studies. Indeed, participatory research approaches are arguably particularly pertinent within the context of volitional reading; as this research seeks to understand children and young people's independent self-initiated reading practices, their active and meaningful involvement in this research area is therefore crucial.

A key principle underpinning participatory approaches is to amplify the voices of individuals who are typically marginalised or deprivileged (Jacobs 2016), for example, children and young people, or those from minority groups. In relation to children and young people, participatory approaches acknowledge the deep knowledge that children and young people hold about their own lives, and take their agency and capacity seriously (Cahill 2007). Indeed, this method aims to empower children and young people as 'agents of change' (Ginwright and James 2002). Participatory approaches require a 'de-privileging of 'researcher only expertise' (Byrne et al. 2009, p. 68), acknowledging that children and young people hold more knowledge about their reading preferences, practices, priorities, and experiences than (adult) researchers do, and that this should be foregrounded within research about their reading lives.

Participatory approaches also aim to share power and democratise the research process (Hodge and Jones 2000; Blumenthal 2011). Within traditional positivist research frameworks, academic researchers are positioned as high-status producers of legitimate knowledge, who can lay almost exclusive claim to authenticity, truth, and validity (Jacobs 2016). This position creates an intrinsic power imbalance between 'the researcher and the researched' (Schäfer and Yarwood 2008, p. 121; see also Bennett and Brunner 2022), whereby participants have relatively little power over the knowledge which is generated about their

lives and/or learning in relation to reading. For research with children and young people in particular, the power imbalance between researcher and participant is amplified by social and cultural structures which position adults as holding more power than children or young people (Heath et al. 2009). Participatory research acknowledges the power imbalances which are always present when adults and children/young people work together and, while recognising that it is not possible to completely eradicate extant power structures, aims to create inclusive non-hierarchical systems whereby power sharing is more equitable (Cahill 2007).

Benefits and methodological considerations

To date, there is currently very little academic literature to guide and support University-based reading researchers who are new to participatory research and who have an interest in researching children and/or young people's volitional reading. Although guidelines for participatory working can be found through organisations who do collaborative work (e.g. Co-Production Collective; National Institute for Health and Research; see also Brasof and Levitan 2022), these are not always applicable to reading research, and work is still required to locate and synthesise resources and decide how to map their principles onto academic research projects. This review paper therefore seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the benefits and methodological considerations associated with participatory approaches, providing an introductory overview for reading researchers new to this approach. We would encourage readers to consider their own research interests (e.g. volitional reading) when reading this section, as knowledge of both the benefits and methodological considerations is important for assessing the appropriateness of participatory methodologies for particular projects. While there are numerous benefits to participatory working, it is an oversimplification to state that 'more' participation is inherently 'better': understanding when and how best to adopt participatory approaches depends upon good knowledge of the methodological considerations.

Benefits

A primary benefit of participatory research is that including children and young people at all stages of a project ensures the research questions, aims, design, and interpretations are built around, or informed by, their priorities, interests, perspectives, and experiences (Kellett 2005; Jacquez et al. 2013; Unertl et al. 2016). Participatory approaches may be particularly pertinent within the context of children and young people's volitional reading, given the rapid diversification of young people's reading practices as they engage more frequently in reading digitally. However, elements of participatory approaches are also suited to the more adult-led concerns regarding declines in volitional book reading (Clark et al. 2023). In terms of benefits, previous research has noted that children and young people 'ask different questions, have different priorities and concerns and see the world through different eyes' (Kellett 2005, p. 3) compared to adult researchers. Therefore, in the context of reading, children and young people's perspectives have potential to offer novel insights into the reading experiences and practices which may have been overlooked from adult-only perspectives (Yazzie-Mintz and McCormick 2012), either in the design or interpretation of research.

This approach also increases the likelihood that the research conducted will produce outcomes which will be of interest and/or benefit to children and/or young people.

Participatory approaches also offer unique benefits for the adults and children/young people who collaborate with one another. Previous research has acknowledged the potential for children and young people to gain skills, knowledge, and experiences through their involvement in participatory projects. For example, in a systematic review of participatory research with children, Bakhtiar et al. (2023) identified multiple benefits for children, including increases in confidence, well-being, sense of agency and sense of achievement, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Vocational training and the opportunity to gain additional qualifications can also be key motivators (Schäfer and Yarwood 2008; Webber et al. 2024). However, it is not only children and young people who gain skills and experience. Adult researchers can also experience personal and professional benefits from participatory working, including an enriched knowledge of reading practices and experiences through the eyes of children and/or young people, changes in their analytical research skills, and the possibility of establishing ongoing opportunities and skills for developing student voice (Bakhtiar et al. 2023; Larkins and Satchwell 2023). Skipper and Pepler (2021) note the importance of researchers shifting from an 'independent' to an 'interdependent' role within participatory research, being open to learning from others and facilitating the inclusion of different voices and contributions to research. In this sense, adult researchers can learn much from the children and young people they collaborate with, and participatory approaches offer the opportunity for shared learning, whereby everyone's knowledge and skills are not just valued, but also developed. See Table 1 for a summary of benefits.

Methodological considerations

As well as highlighting the benefits of participatory research, it is important to recognise practical considerations, to ensure reading researchers do not initiate participatory projects based on romanticised assumptions about their appropriateness. The first point of consideration relates to the time commitment associated with participatory work. Participatory research timelines are often longer than those of traditional research projects (Jeffrey and

Table 1. Summary of the benefits and methodological considerations associated with participatory research with children and/or young people.

Benefits
- Research more likely to be aligned with children/young people's interests/priorities - Provides new avenues for research for University-based researchers - Research more likely to have a positive impact on children/young people's lives and/or learning - Professionally and personally beneficial for children/young people and adult researchers
Methodological considerations
- Longer timeline for research project, and be mindful of time commitment required from children/young people - Potential for differing research interests between adult researchers and children/young people, or between children/young people themselves - Essential to acknowledge power imbalances and work to create equitable, democratic spaces where all contributions are valued - Essential to ensure all have shared expectations of ways of working and, once agreed, project outcomes - Ethical considerations (e.g. ethics of care; ensuring participation is voluntary; bringing projects to an end ethically; practical considerations associated with University ethics systems) - Representation of children/young people within project (i.e. reflect on whose voices may be absent) - Adult researchers and children/young people may require training to work productively in this way - Funders often require clearly specified projects from the outset, which can be challenging for participatory research.

Troman 2004). This is due, in part, to the nature of working in collaboration with others, but particularly those inexperienced with research. Time and care must be taken to initiate and develop strong relationships and establish and refine ways of working together (Bennett and Brunner 2022). If children/young people are informing the reading research aims and methods, more time will be needed to reach consensus, and training to support their involvement may also need to be built into the project timeline. Furthermore, the time commitment associated with participatory projects may make it hard children and/or young people to join, or remain involved. Therefore, information about the expected time commitment should be provided from the outset so that children, young people, and their involved adult (e.g. parent/guardian) can make informed decisions about their capacity to take part.

A second consideration relates to the potential for differing reading research interests and/or priorities between adult researchers and children/young people. For example, research into volitional reading practices, and how to extend and enhance these, has often focused on children and young people's book reading experiences (Wilkinson et al. 2020; Oxley and McGeown 2023; Webber et al. 2023) which may be at odds with the interests and priorities of children and young people themselves, albeit an important area of research in its own right. That said, meaningfully involving children and/or young people as early as possible in a project increases the likelihood that the research will more closely aligned with their interests and priorities. However, it is often the case that research aims and objectives are set by academic researchers and/or funding bodies prior to their involvement. Furthermore, ensuring research projects respond to children and/or young people's interests/priorities while also aligning with the methodological expertise of the researchers may be challenging. Building relationships with children/young people and discussing and deciding upon research aims and priorities together prior to applying for funding or commencing a project could help address this imbalance. In fact, Alderson (2005) advocate for the involvement of children and/or young people in the initial design of research studies, even if they are not subsequently involved at other stages of the research process, to ensure the research conducted reflects their interests. However, due to the process of applying for research funding, it can be challenging to involve children/young people at such early stages of a project, unless funding is available for this initial preparatory work.

It is also important to consider the potential for differing interests and/or priorities among a group of children/young people working on a reading research project (for example, if working with a group of young people with very different volitional reading practices). Even if a broad theme for the research has been decided upon collaboratively, it is not necessarily the case that all will agree upon the subsequent direction of the project, and it can be challenging to proceed without consensus. This point relates to issues of power; as well as acknowledging issues of power between (adult) researchers and (child/young person) partners, it is important to consider the potential power imbalances between children or young people themselves. For example, Kothari (2001) notes that participatory work still has the potential to 'encourage a reassertion of control and power by dominant individuals and groups' (p. 142). Furthermore, where children or young people possess certain skills and/or motivations for engaging with a project, or make contributions which fit within a framework of assumptions regarding the 'right' responses, these members may be perceived as holding more power or authority (by other children/young people and by researchers). Participatory projects should acknowledge these imbalances and work to create equitable, democratic spaces where all contributions are valued.

There are also important considerations which need to be made regarding representation within collaborative groups. One of the principle aims of participatory research is to amplify voices which have traditionally been overlooked (Cahill 2007). Actively involving those with lived experience is an important step, however, it is always important to scrutinise whose voices are still not included. While children or young people involved in a participatory project might be representative in some ways (e.g. race, gender), they may also share certain characteristics (e.g. being motivated to participate in research, being supportive of the project aims, being interested in reading) which do not represent the whole population (Bucknall 2012). It is important to consider the role of gatekeepers, that is, who grants access/selects young people to take part, as this is often non-random (Bakhtiar et al. 2023) and teachers or parents may encourage (or discourage) the participation of certain students which has consequences for representation. It is therefore important to ensure gatekeepers are aware of the importance of diversity within participatory groups (e.g. are explicitly asked to select children with differing levels of reading enjoyment/engagement, if this is important for the project goals) as the need for diversity may not be immediately obvious to them.

Context matters too, particularly as much reading research happens within the school context. Graham et al. (2011) note that research which is conducted with children or young people within an education setting (e.g. schools, universities) can reinforce 'education norms' (p. 203) where children and young people perceive engaging in research to be the same as schoolwork, and thereby feel they need to participate, or to perform participation in certain ways (see also Dockett et al. 2012). This is particularly important to consider within the context of volitional reading research, which seeks to understand children and young people's self-initiated and often out-of-school reading practices, which may be very different to school-based reading practices. In addition, where projects are 'adult-initiated' (i.e. young people are invited to participate by adults), young people may naturally hold expectations about their role – especially given traditional power imbalances that exist between adults and young people (Heath et al. 2009) – even when it is explicitly stated that their role in the project should be equal to adults (Kennedy 2018; Webber et al. 2024). Acknowledging these assumptions and breaking down expectations surrounding power and knowledge generation in participatory projects is essential (Jacquez et al. 2013) and emphasises the importance of training adult researchers in participatory research skills so that they can enable and facilitate an atmosphere which positions all contributors as holding equal power and responsibility (Skipper and Pepler 2021).

Once children and young people have joined a project, it is important to establish clear methods of working together to ensure a consensus is reached regarding the expectations and desired outcomes. All project partners need to have realistic expectations about the research process and need to be aware of any constraints on what can be achieved. It is also important to establish what children/young people hope and expect from a participatory project, and work to incorporate these where possible (Webber et al. 2024). However, as well as having clear expectations for a project at the outset, it is also important that the project itself be flexible (as much as possible) to change based on input from children/young people. Indeed, some elements of compromise are likely to be required by both adult researchers and children/young people; this should be discussed openly, and in an environment where such conversations are welcomed.

Ethical considerations associated with participatory research with children and young people are essential, and have been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Loveridge et al., 2023;

Thomas and O'Kane 1998). In addition to the principles of working and methodological considerations already mentioned in this paper, these researchers stress the importance of working with an ethics of care (Loveridge et al. 2023) and stress the importance of students' choice, that is, ensuring participation (or continued participation) is not coercive and that students have choice, as much as possible, over how they contribute to research projects (Thomas and O'Kane 1998). From a practical perspective, participatory research has implications for university ethics boards and the granting of ethical approval, which is typically provided only on the basis of a clearly specified research project. For participatory projects, ethics applications must specify recruitment approaches for children/young people's involvement, participatory structures/ways of working, and anticipated methodological approaches. Codes of Conduct are also frequently included with ethics paperwork, which set out expectations for the adult and young researchers, to ensure everyone has a shared understanding of the importance of working within a safe space, where all opinions, experiences and boundaries are respected. The nature of participatory projects is such that university ethics boards are likely to need to be responsive to revisions, responding in a timely manner as children/young people shape the project. This can put an extra burden on ethics boards and therefore needs to be considered and discussed with ethics boards from the outset.

A final issue to consider is how participatory projects are brought to an end. The flexible nature of participatory projects sometimes means that there is no set timeline, and the point at which a project will be completed may be unclear. Participatory projects require some kind of 'closure moment' (Graham et al. 2011, p. 1) to ensure that they are brought to an end ethically. Children and young people should be debriefed and future plans should be discussed and agreed upon (Graham et al. 2011). Lundy (2007) also emphasises the importance of informing children and young people about the outcomes of their participation and how their views have informed action. This links to the sustainability of participatory projects: participatory work should aim to build capacity (e.g. skills, resources, experience, structures), so that children and young people feel more confident to work on issues that are important to them once the initial project has ended. Hacker et al. (2012) note that sustainability in participatory research involves 'academics 'working themselves out of a job' such that the community eventually takes over the process and the university moves on to other projects.' (p. 4). In this sense, participatory projects have the potential to be more than the sum of their parts, providing children and young people with the tools to continue affect the issues that are important to them into the future. See Table 1 for a summary of methodological considerations.

While good knowledge of the benefits and methodological considerations associated with participatory research is important, those shared above have typically not come from reading research projects. To exemplify participatory research within the context of reading research, the following section provides more detailed insights into a range of different participatory approaches which have been applied within the context of children and/or young people's reading, before reflecting on the implications for research into volitional reading.

To identify relevant studies for this section, in February 2023, the following search terms were used: 'participatory' and 'reading' or 'literacy' and 'child' or 'teenage' or adolescen' or 'young people' within article title, abstract or keywords, using the search engine SCOPUS. This led to the identification of 184 documents. Following this, only documents within the subject areas of 'social science', 'arts and humanities', and 'psychology' were selected, which

resulted in 116 documents. The final author read all abstract titles, and relevant abstracts, and independently selected which to include in this article. Articles selected for inclusion had to be empirical research studies, therefore relevant reviews/commentaries (for example, Cook-Sather, 2022) were not included. Relevance to the topic (i.e. reading research) was prioritised and narrowed the number of relevant documents considerably. Final articles selected were those which were most relevant and showcased a range of participatory methodologies. Note: A recently published article by the authors, directly related to the focus of this article was also included, although this was not identified within the search as it was not published at the time of the review.

Participatory approaches within the context of reading research

Within the context of children and young people's reading, participatory approaches can be used in myriad ways. From understanding their perspectives, preferences, practices, and priorities with regards to reading (e.g. Levy and Thompson 2015; Henning 2023; Webber et al. 2024) or reading-related contexts such as libraries (Pahl and Allan 2011), through to co-creating or informing programmes and resources to encourage volitional reading (e.g. McGeown et al., 2023). While participatory approaches have been used to examine other aspects of literacy, for example, children's view on writing (Dunn et al. 2014) this review focuses on reading research studies only,

Firstly, Henning (2023) describes a project focused on understanding young (aged 4-5) children's literacy experiences during their first year of school. While the project was designed by adults, children are described as 'assigned but informed' participants (Hart 1992). Undertaken during COVID-19, the researcher positioned the children as 'special types of researchers, called ethnographers' whose role it was to undertake research activities (e.g. photographs illustrating their school-based literacy experiences). Interestingly, the researcher notes that her inability to be in the school setting herself may have increased the children's feelings of agency and decentred the adult researchers' importance within the research project. However, it was also disadvantageous as she was less able to understand and observe their research practices. Notably, this participatory approach allowed the majority of children (17 out of 18 in the class contributed photographs) to participate, which is unusual for participatory projects, where concerns about minority representation are often central. Furthermore, the methodological approach (use of photographs taken by children, followed by discussion of these) was found to be both engaging and accessible for young children. Indeed, using methodological approaches which interest and engage children and/or young people may be as important as ensuring the subject matter itself is of interest (Thomas and O'Kane 1998); however, this may require participatory researchers to be flexible in their methodological approaches, which may mean a willingness and capacity to learn new ones.

In an earlier participatory research project with primary school children, Pahl and Allan (2011) researched children's reading practices within their community, with a focus on the local library. Their project included children aged 6- and 12-year-old (although notably children aged 10–12-years-old participated more fully) and involved children using several visual methods (e.g. photographs, flip videos and scrapbooks) as well as interviews with adults, with interview questions decided, and led, by the children. In this project, the adult and child (called Research Rebels) research team explored what the library meant, how and

why it was used, and where and how literacy was present in the community, with children as 'agents in the process of collecting and analysing the data' (p210). Interestingly, the adult authors noted that in the analysis of the data, children's perceptions of literacy included practices which were less visible to adults, stressing the value of this methodological approach. The authors concluded that the participatory approach helped them to understand 'the ways [children] used literacy on their own terms' (p. 210), however there was very little critical reflection of the challenges or methodological considerations (e.g. ethical considerations, issues of representation) associated with this project, and we would urge researchers publishing their participatory projects to share these, to collectively advance learning from each project.

In other research, Levy and Thompson (2015) provide interesting insights into how older children (aged 11-12) can encourage and elicit the voices of younger children (aged 5-6) in research. In this project, Levy and Thompson (2015) created a collaborative model, referred to as 'buddy partnerships', to explore the factors which influence children's reading engagement. Dyads of boys (one aged 5-6-years-old matched with one aged 11-12-years-old) were asked to work together to create an informational DVD to help teachers and parents understand the factors that influence children's reading engagement. Reflecting on this approach, the authors noted that the older children's 'empathetic and playful' approach and communication style, and 'shared understanding' of childhood experiences, helped to draw out young children's views and experiences of reading engagement. This represents an interesting and novel approach to involve older children/young people in participatory research approaches as a way to bridge the gap between adults and young children.

In a reflective account of the similarities and differences between child-led and adult-led interviews, Webber et al. (2021a) describe a project with 12 children (aged 9-11) who joined an adult research team and interviewed their peers about their reading practices and experiences. In this study, the methodological approach (interviews) and research focus (children's perceptions of a reader and volitional reading practices) were decided by the adult research team, but the children had considerable input into the interview questions, and received research training so that they could interview their peers, if they wished. In the analysis of the interviews led by children, Webber et al. (2021a) noted similar features of the child-led interviews to those reported by Levy and Thompson (2015), for example, simpler and more playful language and communication styles, and discussion of shared reading experiences. Interestingly, within this research study, thematic analysis was carried out separately for those interviews led by adults and those led by children, and the same themes emerged in both (see McGeown et al. 2020a, 2020b for research findings arising from this project). This illustrates how, when working together on participatory projects, children and adults can produce complementary outcomes which, while utilising shared methods, draw upon different types of knowledge and experience. In their paper, the authors noted methodological considerations associated with this approach (e.g. time and resource intensive, ethical considerations) which are important for researchers to understand if considering this approach. Furthermore, while the class teacher was encouraged to invite children with different reading experiences to take part in the participatory team, the authors recognise that the majority of those involved were engaged readers and/or interested in the project aims.

In participatory research with young people, Webber et al. (2024) describes her work with a young people's advisory panel (n = 6, aged 13-15-years-old, from 3 high schools) over

the duration of a school year to research motivators and barriers to young people's volitional reading, a research aim which had been set by the adult research team. Due to COVID-19, all participation was online, through six meetings during the year with the researcher, some co-collection of qualitative interview data, and some additional offline communication prior to and after each meeting. While teachers were encouraged to put forward young people with diverse reading experiences for the panel, and while demographic diversity was important, the final panel consisted of five females and one male, all identifying as White Scottish/British, with four describing themselves as readers and two as non-readers. This highlights the role of gatekeepers (i.e. teachers, but also parents), but also initial selection of schools, and how this can influence representation. In this project, the panel contributed to the study design, collected some data (optional, through peer-led interviews), supported with the interpretation of findings, and provided input into future ideas to promote volitional reading among young people. Importantly, and often missing from participatory projects, was an evaluation of young people's perspectives and experiences of being involved in the research process. These young people noted having their voices heard, feeling like they were making a difference, and gaining skills and experiences to draw upon in the future were all benefits. In addition, their thoughts on the important qualities of participatory practices included being respectful of one another, building relationships, and contributing towards thoughtful discussion. This emphasises the importance of Codes of Conduct, and also ensuring all those involved are committed to this way of working.

Applying participatory research to the future study of volitional reading

While all the studies described above have utilised participatory approaches, they reflect very different types of participation. These decisions may have been based on appropriateness to the research question, researcher experience, the age of the population, and parameters set prior to the research commencing (e.g. set by external funding). However, each provides useful insights into future participatory practices to study children and/or young people's volitional reading. For example, despite Henning's (2023) research being carried out with young children in a school context, it highlights the importance of ensuing the methods of data collection are engaging, accessible and meaningful to young people (and not just the research topic) and of considering methodological approaches which have potential to include many perspectives, rather than a smaller minority. It also stresses the importance of feelings of autonomy and distance from the adult-researcher to increase young people's feelings of agency in the research process. Furthermore, the research by Pahl and Allan (2011) exemplifies the importance of research being conducted out with the school context, which will be particularly important to study volitional reading practices, and also stresses the added-value of involving young people in the interpretation of data, and not simply as contributors to the research design, method and/or data collection process. Levy and Thomson's (2015) study suggests a model of participatory research where peers co-create research together, which could be applied to study different aspects of young people's volitional reading practices, while Webber et al. (2021; 2024) highlights how gatekeepers (e.g. teachers, parents/guardians) can have implications for representation, meaning that some forms of volitional reading may continue to be studied (i.e. book reading) while others neglected. Webber et al.'s (2021) research also demonstrated that complementary findings may occur when adults and children lead research/collect data independently, but

using the same methodological approach and asking the same research questions. The impact of COVID on different participatory projects (Henning 2023; Webber et al. 2024) also offers insights into how technology can give increased agency to young people, or increase the geographic reach of young people involved, which may be important when studying volitional reading.

In the future study of young people's volitional reading, reading researchers from different disciplinary traditions are likely to approach participatory research in different ways, depending on their research interests and methodological expertise. That said, it is important that we learn from each participatory project we conduct, and share our learning with the research community, in order to collectively raise the standards of our work. Indeed, most researchers are not trained in participatory approaches, and knowledge (e.g. of effective participatory approaches, methodological and ethical considerations), skills (e.g. in facilitation, communication) and dispositions (e.g. being humble, not seeing oneself as the expert) are all important. There is a distinct lack of research which explores the perspectives of those who have been involved in participatory research: researcher first-person reflective accounts of participatory research are more common than studies which share children/young people's perspectives and/or experiences (although see Webber et al. 2024). We therefore should endeavour to evaluate participatory research projects from the perspectives of those we invite to contribute, in addition to engaging in more critical reflection of our research, and sharing these challenges, methodological or ethical considerations. This will allow us to cumulatively learn from the experiences of each other.

Finally, while not typically discussed within participatory research, but relevant nonetheless, are the ways in which children and young people could be involved in peer review processes. Actively encouraging and supporting their involvement in this stage of the research process recognises the contribution they can make to the translation of academic research. *Frontiers for Young Minds* is an open access journal, which aims to bring research insights to children and young people aged 8-15-years-old. Uniquely, the peer reviewers for the journal are children and young people themselves, who – supported by an adult reviewer – review content submitted by adult research teams and suggest revisions to ensure content it is interesting, understandable, and accessible for others their age. This journal includes a wide range of research papers focusing on different aspects of literacy research, for example, understanding readers' connection with fictional characters (Webber et al. 2021b), understanding the science behind eye movements during reading (Wegener et al. 2023), and exploring the link between attention and reading development (Hoyos et al. 2022). This represents a means of supporting participation into the dissemination phase of a project and acknowledges young people as experts in knowing what, and how, to communicate to their peers.

Conclusion

Participatory research has considerable potential to increase our understanding of the volitional reading practices and experiences of children and young people, and this methodological approach is particularly timely, as volitional book reading is declining, and technology is playing an increasingly prominent role in children and young people's volitional reading practices. To support researchers interested in using participatory methods to study volitional reading among children and/or young people, this article highlights the

benefits and methodological considerations associated with participatory approaches, in addition to sharing insights from previous reading research projects which have utilised participatory methods. As a research community seeking to extend and/or enhance the quality of children and young people's volitional reading experiences, it is essential that we begin to share our experiences of participatory methods, as we work across different international contexts, with different populations of children/young people, with different methodologies, and/or on different areas of volitional reading. In doing so, we will begin to can enhance the quality of our research, and hopefully, improve the quality of children and young people's volitional reading experiences.

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Positionality statement

The authors include three University-based researchers: two early career (PhD) and one-mid career, and one young person known to the mid-career researcher. Their interest and knowledge of this topic stems from University-led research projects (adults) or school based activities (young person) seeking to understand and/or support children/young people's reading. The research team are all white and female.

Rights retention statement

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