Relational Research as Disruptive Practice: the Need for Democratic Methodologies in an Era of Democratic Fragility"

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Introduction

The Democratic Methodologies Special Issue comes from a place of both hope and frustration. The articles within this Special Issue offer internationally significant perspectives on, and understandings of, democratic methodologies in education during a time of crisis. This collection presents a range of research projects and thinking that all possess what we argue is the main feature of a democratic methodology - an explicit aim to further democracy, whether in the macro, meso, or the micro. We begin this issue by exploring the need for such methodologies and what they might be and consider what we mean by 'democracy'.

The authors' work offered here is intersectional in nature, exploring issues such as crip time in research (Liddiard), decolonisation of research consent in Ghana and the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in the UK (Twum-Danso Imoh), the importance of democratic space as resistance for LGBTQIA+ communities in Brazil (Mattos and Cassal), the crucial role of children and young people in developing intergenerational, collaborative responses to the climate crisis in Portugal (Diógenes-Lima, Pereira, Macedo, Menezes and Malafaia) and the tensions that arise when conducting a participatory project in a neoliberal school context in the UK (Green et al).

The message conveyed by the authors in this Special Issue is one that we cannot ignore. Each of them highlights what their research experiences have taught them about how, even when we are in a period of global instability and increasingly divisive, populist politics, democracy can be furthered through our approach to research methodologies. This editorial is thus an article in itself, arguing that democratic methodologies have an essential core purpose: to further democracy. As editors, we believe that now, more than ever, the global political context shows that there is an urgent, renewed need for what we frame as democratic methodologies.

An Era of Democratic Fragility

According to the Freedom House report (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe, 2024), freedom and democracy have declined globally for the 18th consecutive year. The report catalogues problematic elections, armed conflict, coups and a rise in authoritarian rule. Notably, 2024 has brought elections to the United States, India, and South Africa, all of which raise questions for the future democratic welfare of those countries. Governments that are widely

perceived as democratic have seen a rise in authoritarian policies, such as under Donald Trump's first presidency, when abortion rights were severely diminished (Woolhandler et al., 2021), and his early actions as President Elect raise further concerns. Globally, including Central Europe to Central Asia, ten countries are deemed to have deteriorated in terms of democracy and freedom (Smeltzer and Karppi, 2024). In Europe, the share of the vote received by populist parties has increased from 12 percent in the 1990s, to 32 percent in the last few years (Solace Global Intelligence, 2023). Both the United Kingdom and the European Union faced key elections this year. These elections were characterised by "two-dimensional policy space" (Huber et al., 2023) and the rise of authoritarian and populist parties (Ridge-Newman, 2024; van Rij et al., 2024), which raised important questions over the future democratic welfare of the countries concerned.

Whilst the elections discussed above may themselves be democratic, we argue for a broader understanding of democracy in this article. Specifically, we are concerned about the narrowing of the political discourse, noting that pluralism is becoming weaker within these countries and elsewhere, which Linz (2000) argued is the key indicator of authoritarianism. These developments suggest that, in a world experiencing climate crisis, vast technological change, and health and welfare crises, we are at risk of democracy diminishing, in the macro and the micro, as governments increasingly align themselves with polices of nationalism and xenophobia (Brown, 2019) in an apparent bid to break the speed of multiculturalism. Brown (2019, p. 2) argues that this move has been difficult to name, "is this authoritarianism, fascism, populism, illiberal democracy, undemocratic liberalism, right-wing plutocracy? Or something else?". It might be unclear what the move is, but it is impossible to ignore and, therefore, it is important to state that, in our argument for democratic methodologies, we advocate that research cannot be neutral. The research in this Special Issue is necessarily political and has much to contribute to more democratic policies and practices.

In the UK, populist rhetoric is increasingly pervasive, with ensuing division not only within our party politics but in our daily politics, in the spheres of education, health and wider welfare. Many communities are expressing growing disillusionment with top-down decision-making processes that are distanced from the realities of their everyday lives and experiences, resulting in them feeling overlooked and unrepresented (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). As Sterenberg (2024) explains, when there is societal fear, engagement with reason can diminish and more populist discourses become more attractive, as was seen in the 1930s. Taking into consideration the growth in populist political movements, Brown (2019) proposes that an alliance of forces, whether the Christian right, xenophobes, misogynists or authoritarians, find themselves a useful bedfellow in the shape of neoliberalism. Brown's suggestion is that anti democrats and neoliberalists have much in common; both are suspicious of the state, pluralism, and equality and have a disdain for experts. With the climate emergency, for example, we can see that both anti democrats and neoliberals regularly demonstrate a suspicion of science and rationalism, yet, simultaneously, "evidence based" research in the field of education is often promulgated whilst not providing any

evidence (Wrigley, 2016). Evidence based research has become valorised in certain quarters of the educational establishment (Coldwell et al., 2017). In England this has been particularly notable under the English governments between 2010 and 2024. Similar trends in evidence-based education can be seen in other nations, such as the USA and Australia (Savage, 2017). It can seem contradictory to refer to an evidence-based approach to education as being 'neoliberal, when we have just given an example of how neoliberalists disdain expert opinion and evidence in other spheres such as climate change. However, what is vital to consider here, is how neoliberal and populist viewpoints can influence what type of evidence 'counts' in education and, therefore, who is valued as an 'expert'.

Savage's thinking (2017) is helpful here. He suggests that it is essential to understand how neoliberalist policies have increasingly repositioned education as an 'economic good', which has resulted in:

> a significant intensification of links between schooling and the economy, and profound related shifts in how schools are governed. Indeed, rather than simply being linked to economic markets, schools are now seen as central cogs in economic markets. This shift has fundamentally transformed how schools operate, how parents navigate school systems, how policymakers seek to manage schools, how curriculum designers decide the knowledge and skills young people must learn, and how school principals and teachers operate in schools (Savage, 2017, p. 143)

This issue of how schools are viewed, and the type of evidence that counts and is valued, can also be related to the research field in Higher Education. Indeed, we suggest that tensions are likely to occur when researchers attempt to develop 'thicker' forms of democratic research methodologies in these education contexts. For example, we argue that, in the English Higher Education system, as universities seek to prove that their research is 'world beating' through a range of metrics, the type of democratic, action orientated research that is written about in this Special Issue is often marginalised (Watson and Razak, 2013). In the Higher Education marketplace, evidence provided by the global university rankings and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is high stakes, affecting not only a university's position in the rankings but what is seen as 'valuable' research, based on publications and citations and the marketing of 'stellar academics' to attract students (Matthews, 2016). In this ultra-competitive environment, the production of widely read, significant academic papers, is often viewed as more important (and profitable) than the voices and needs of local communities.

Furthermore, the neoliberal drive for efficiency within universities often precludes or discourages research that necessitates relationship building within research projects. As the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate, time is important in democratic research, whether it is to build relationships, or to recognise diverse experiences of time for people with different circumstances and abilities (Liddiard). All this can have a knock-on effect on

researchers who adopt more equitable and collective approaches to research. In the Higher Education marketplace such research may appear to be less marketable, as researchers reject notions of the 'stellar' academic, instead choosing to foreground the contributions of academically 'unknown' community members or children in roles such as co-authors, rather than merely highlighting the achievements of the individual academic.

It is increasingly clear that, given this approach, domains such as education, which were previously thought of as' non-economic', have thus become marketised (Foucault, 2008). As a consequence, the economic turn in education has inevitably influenced what is viewed as 'valuable' in educational terms and, therefore, how this is assessed and measured, as Metcalf (2017) explains:

> the authority of institutions and experts has been displaced by the aggregative logic of big data... The authority of the professor, the reformer, the legislator or the jurist does not derive from the market, but from humanistic values such as public spiritedness, conscience or the longing for justice. Long before the Trump administration started demeaning them, such figures had been drained of salience by an explanatory scheme that can't explain them.

Whilst evidence-based sounds right and proper, it has been highlighted that education is messy, random control trials are difficult (Wrigley, 2020) and can be ethically problematic in schools where there are multiple factors impacting different children.

The assumption that evidence-based education is the gold standard contributes to a narrowed understanding of education and educational research, largely focussing on academic achievement of particular groups, and ignoring the structural difficulties and democratic deficits within different systems (Wrigley, 2016, 2020). However, in stressing the need for democratic methodologies, we are not advocating the removal of evidence-based research, but rather problematising the drift towards it, the denigration of other types of research that may not be included in the government's view of an 'evidence-based approach' and the way in which this impacts on democracy. As Nussbaum (2016) argues, a crisis in education has occurred as nations move towards the prioritisation of education for profit (the ability for education to develop economically viable human beings) over education for democratic citizenship. We contend there is a similar crisis in the valuing of educational research.

Biesta suggests that evidence-based research has become dominated by a "what works agenda" which narrows research, making "it difficult, if not impossible, to ask the questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter" (Biesta, 2007: 5). Wrigley and Mccusker (2019: 5–6) reiterate this, arguing that "the failure to recognise key human characteristics (agency, volition, intentionality, understanding, reflection) leads to pseudo-science which both assumes and promotes less than human

behaviour". For us it is essential that democratic methodologies recognise and highlight the importance and range of such key human characteristics in everyday education experiences. This counters neoliberal definitions of democratic education projects, which, as Biesta (2006) explains, prepare young people to become citizens by:

> equipping individuals with the proper set of democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, without asking questions about their relationships with others and about the social and political context in which they learn and act (Biesta, 2006: 120).

Democratic methodologies must ask: what and who does this research work for and who has a say in determining this?

Democratic Methodologies

In order to challenge narrow definitions of 'effective' research, democratic methodologies also necessitate a rejection of the narrow, 'thin' approach to democracy and education (Apple, 2014) that has impacted education research over recent years, fuelled in England, and in some areas of the United States, by the "knowledge-turn" in schooling (Deng, 2022: 599). Such a knowledge turn, Apple (2014) argues, is influenced by the neoliberal emphasis on efficient learning, and accountability measures, which focus on very specific bodies of knowledge to be learnt and consumed (Hirsch, 2019), resulting in a distinct and deliberate policy move away from critical education and praxis (Freire, 2013). Education (and therefore also research in this sphere) that questions the world around us, problematises inequalities, challenges the status quo and proposes alternative practices, has become increasingly side-lined in England and the United States, with progressive education often deemed as inappropriately 'woke', as highlighted by Kemi Badenoch (2020), the then British Equalities Minister:

> Let me be clear that any school that teaches those elements of critical race theory as fact, ... without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law.

In contrast, the approaches to education research in this Special Issue strongly advocate for the Dewian (1916) notion that problem solving, grappling with real life issues and working with others, helps to create democratic citizens. We specifically argue that democracy is rooted in the everyday, as Dewey (2011: 153) put it "a way of life", and not simply something to be enacted at the ballot box.

All the articles in our Special Issue build on a rich history of democratic and activist research such as Fine (2006), Freire (2013), Hall (2005), Fals Borda (2006), Tuhiwai Smith (2022), amongst others; their work has been substantial, and we owe a debt to them. However, as editors, we believe that there is a need to reconsider what we, in this Special Issue, frame as democratic methodologies in the context of education. Although many have written about

democratising research, including Edwards and Branelly (2017), Mertens (2009) and Hernandez et al (2017), this work often focuses on the development of processes that support research that is inclusive and multivocal; ensuring that many different voices are heard, rather than solely the voices of the elite or the researchers. This is important, and central to our work. However, significantly, we advocate for an additional layer that is central to the purpose of democratic methodologies: that they should aim to further democracy in its 'thick', collaborative form (Apple, 2014).

To achieve this aim, we propose that democratic methodologies are relational in nature. They are, we argue, methodologies which deliberately set out to further democracy by building relationships based on collaborative endeavour and the disruption of traditional power dynamics (Burkitt, 2016; Cordelli, 2015; Ralls, 2019; Ralls et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2009). We assert that a 'relational turn' in research is essential if we, as researchers, are to help counter an international decline in democracy and freedom, and the impact that this has had on the role education may or may not play in democratic societies. As editors, our view of democratic research methodologies reflects the belief that there is a need for collaboration and shifts in traditional power dynamics in research. As a result, the approaches adopted in this Special Issue are interested in 'thick', collaborative democracy and we push the idea that democratic methodologies should always be interested in the practice of democracy, founded on processes of critical engagement and social justice (Carr et al., 2012), and orientated towards the notion of collective endeavour.

For methodologies to be democratic, there is, therefore, a need to focus on the processual nature of the research, creating spaces for discursive democracy (Dryzek, 1999) that provide opportunities for researchers and participants to deliberate collaboratively, not only on the topics discussed but also to question and debate the research process itself Benhabib (1996). It is important to recognise, however, that deliberative approaches may be participatory, but not necessarily democratic. Viewing methodologies only in terms of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996) and collaboration can be problematic, with a lack of acknowledgement of aspects of power and antagonism that inevitably emerge in such spaces (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1999). Consequently, in this Democratic Methodologies Special Issue there is no fixed view of how such methods might be 'done', or indeed one set definition of democracy. Democratic methodologies are necessarily plural in nature, recognising that different paradigms, ontologies, and epistemologies may be used. We understand that these myriad meanings have resulted in accusations that 'democracy' is an empty or floating signifier (Howarth, 2015; Laclau, 1996), used to convey an apparently universally accepted meaning, but with so many different meanings ascribed to it, it has become meaningless (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Whilst we acknowledge that democracy is a long-contested concept (Foner, 2000), we reject the neoliberal view of democracy in education, portrayed as an individual's right to consume and own (Wells et al., 2002).

In the face of increasing populism, as researchers advocating democratic methodologies it is vital that we recognise when there may be alternative, more collective political discourses emerging, so that in addition to combating neoliberal approaches towards education and democracy, we can build alliances based on commonalities of thinking. Currently, many countries around the world are looking to resolve issues of poverty and social injustice by rejecting traditional individualistic capitalist economic models and adopting alternative approaches, such as the Wellbeing Economy (Stiglitz et al., 2018), Social Solidarity Economy or Solidarity Economy (OECD, 2023), Inclusive Economy (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016), and Doughnut Economy (Raworth, 2017). These political alternatives recognise how policies and practices focused on developing connectedness, belonging and mutual respect can counter divisive populist discourses and help to build more equitable and inclusive places and economies (Crisp et al., 2024; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Vickers et al., 2017) Whereas populist models favour divisive individualistic policies that can ultimately lead to 'de-democratization' and 'repression' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), alternative economic models are looking for approaches that constitute relationships with others that are "fulfilling rather than alienating" (Donati and Archer, 2015: 15) generating 'relational goods' (or resources) such as reciprocal trust, emotional support, care, special obligations and social influence (Cordelli, 2015).

Democratic methodologies can offer support for these political alternatives in terms of new ways of looking at research. As nations, regions and cities around the globe recognise that more collaborative, relational approaches focused on co-operation, collectivity and the common good are a viable alternative to those that set out to serve individualistic concerns (Crisp et al., 2024; Fioramonti et al., 2022; International Trade Centre, 2022; OECD, 2023; Stiglitz et al., 2009, 2018; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016) we argue that it is essential that academia and academic research methods shift in a similar direction, particularly when conducting research that is said to be participatory in nature, or is focused on issues of social justice.

A further example of where democratic methodologies can help would be in the field of democratic decision-making policies with children and young people. Recent policy developments such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee (European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 2021; The Council of the European Union, 2021) are key European Commission policies aimed to "better protect all children, to help them fulfil their rights and to place them right at the centre of EU policy making". Participation in political and democratic life is the first thematic area of the Strategy, emphasising the need for Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) to be taken seriously, with children and young people able to act as agents of change in policy making and legislative decision-making processes that affect them. We recognise, however, that in practice, changing power dynamics between 'the researcher and the researched', working relationally in our research

methodologies by ‘doing with,’ rather than ‘doing to’ (Ferlazzo, 2011) are not necessarily straightforward.

We suggest that relational theory (Holland et al., 2001) can be used to help better understand researcher and participant identities in such research ethics contexts. We believe that it is important to reflect on the extent to which research relationships are being constituted to generate the type of ‘relational goods’ (such as interpersonal trust, emotional support, care and social influence) (Cordelli, 2015) that can support a more reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants. So, when considering what constitutes a ‘democratic methodology’, we propose that it is essential to consider how relational goods (Cordelli, 2015) can be generated through the research process. The articles in this Special Issue illustrate our belief that democratic methodologies can develop such relational goods, as part of a wider movement that supports policies and institutional structures that promote social justice and solidarity (Burkitt, 2016; Cordelli, 2015; Donati and Archer, 2015; McLaughlin and Clarke, 2010).

The articles that follow illustrate our belief that there is an acute need for ‘thicker’ research methodologies that set out to deliberately strengthen links between and within communities, and to challenge approaches that further segregate people and their communities, disenfranchising them from decision making processes. Democratic methodologies refute neoliberal policies that condition an understanding of ourselves as individuals in a meritocracy and not part of a wider community (Apple, 2016; Sant, 2019).

Therefore, the authors in this Special Issue deliberately challenge approaches to education research that are based on deficit ‘interventions’ that blame the individual or community for not working hard enough and gaining the right kind of education (Frank, 2017; Shamir, 2008). Instead, the authors show that if research methodologies are to have the potential to develop relational goods, researchers who adopt democratic methodologies must seek to make connections with those who are overlooked or disenfranchised, challenging those who make decisions and policies that further segregate people and their communities and disenfranchise them (Apple, 2016). We argue this is particularly pertinent to education research today.

We recognise that challenging taken for granted notions of research can be messy, complex and time consuming but suggest that encouraging thinking around dissensus in democratic methodologies reminds us that disruption to the common sense is necessary if we are to further democracy (Rancière, 2010, 2014). It is important to remember that democracy can be disruptive, often disrupting the status quo, or power relationships. The work of Mouffe (1999) on ‘agnostic pluralism’ is helpful here. This approach to democratic methodologies can help to counter the destructive divisions promoted by populist politics, focusing instead on the constructive reciprocal learning that can come from agonism between adversaries. Rather than encouraging antagonism between enemies; “we could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an ‘antagonism’ into an ‘agonism’” (Mouffe, 1999, p756).

Based on this premise, our conceptualisation of democratic methodologies seeks to adopt a pluralist approach to democracy, one that:

> should be envisaged as a "mixed-game," i.e., in part collaborative and in part conflictual and not as a wholly co-operative game (Mouffe, 1999, p756).

In this way, the approaches to democratic methodologies in this Special Issue align with the work on democratic agency by Michael Fielding (2001, 2010). When discussing research in schools, Fielding (2010) makes a plea for a move away from instrumental research approaches defined by set tasks or roles, 'orientated towards increased measurable, organizational performance' which, he argues, use student voice to serve adult concerns. Instead, Fielding advocates for a personal, rather than a functional approach to research, which involves 'working and learning together in partnership, rather than one party using the other for often covert ends' Thus, Fielding calls for a transparent acknowledgement of issues of power and hierarchy that allow what he calls 'restless encounters' of meaning-making to take place within a democratic dialogic space of 'mutual trust, care, autonomy, and respect' (Fielding, 2010, p66).

However, Fielding's work with schools (2010) also helps to illustrate our belief that, although we may have visions of changing government policy or indeed global policy, as researchers we are also realists, and thus extend the definition of democratic methodologies to those that explicitly adopt approaches and practices for research that afford democracy at all levels, whether that be at the micro, meso, or macro. We argue that democratic methodologies need to go further than traditional conceptualisations of activist and participatory research, explicitly adopting approaches that comprise research processes and practices that improve democracy in the smallest of arenas.

Finally, before highlighting the specific contributions of the authors to this Special Issue, we wish to emphasise that democratic methodologies must be seen as more than participatory. Often, democratic methodologies are participatory, as are all the projects within this Special Issue, but they also emphasise the voices of the marginalised within research (Ahmed, 2017; Tuck et al., 2015) and further democracy that way. Traditionally, research, especially western research, has embedded problematic hierarchies between the researcher and the researched (Tuhiwai Smith, 2022). The researched are often marginalised communities who become objects, with various parts of their lives extracted by the researcher. Such practices, whilst still common, have been challenged over the decades by researchers including Fals Borda (2006) and Fine (2006). We suggest that these traditional, unilateral rather than relational (Warren et al., 2009) approaches to research, place researchers in a position similar to Rancière's (2010) concept of the police, as an order that keeps people in their place; only certain voices are permitted, and others are excluded.

When considering democratic methodologies, this means that we are left with an unresolved “wicked problem” (Cuevas-Parra, 2020), where ethics processes are still often based on notions of research that “does to” (Ferlazzo, 2011) rather than “does with” community members, making it difficult to develop models of democratic research where participants are re-positioned as co-producers, researchers and authors on matters of research that affect them (Twum-Danso Imoh). We argue that this can be seen in many areas of research, where acceptable voices are allowed ‘in’ whilst unacceptable people and their opinions are kept outside. This results in those who are unable to speak in the public sphere being voiceless, yet to speak and to demonstrate that one has a voice – regardless of one’s position in society – is part of becoming human and having agency. Thus, our concept of democracy is for a ‘relational democracy’ that ruptures traditional conceptualisations of power and positionality, using research to reposition people in relation to those in power, especially those who have traditionally been silenced, and kept “outside” the system or the community. We call for research methodologies that move those who are traditionally overlooked into the public sphere and to demand voices that have agency. As can be seen in all the articles in this Special Issue, it is necessary not only to speak out and promote dissensus but to do so in relation to others (Haines Lyon, 2018). We believe that working relationally (Blossom-Ward et al., 2023; Ralls, 2016, 2017, 2019; Ralls et al., 2022) is central to democratic methodologies.

Article summaries

All the articles in this issue are clear that democratic methodologies are relational in nature. They focus on the importance of relationship-building among and between diverse groups and institutions (such as policymakers and children), to develop leadership opportunities and to bridge divides in culture and power (Warren et al, 2009). As such, our approach is about questioning and disrupting the power relationships that are embedded in traditional research methods and exploring how different processes and practices of research in education can contribute to democracy in society. We view democratic methodologies as intersectional, dialogic and willing to work with tension, advocating for a need to challenge existing academic understandings about research, methodologies, paradigms and, indeed, institutional ethics processes.

The articles in The Democratic Methodologies Special Issue provide a space to explore how reimagining approaches to research methodologies in Education might contribute to more reciprocal modes of learning, decision making and research dissemination that alter power dynamics between researchers and research participants and actively seek to develop research relationships, policies and practices that can provide a catalyst for a more democratic world.

Mattos’ article explicitly addresses how developing collectivity through group work can provide democratic spaces for change in education in the most challenging of times. The article focuses on two case studies in schools, one with children during the Covid 19

Pandemic, and one with teachers exploring gender and sexuality. Both projects were conducted in Rio de Janeiro when the authoritarian Bolsonaro government in Brazil was clamping down on progressive educators and politicians. Drawing on queer and critical pedagogies, both case studies demonstrate how radical group work can be, in terms of understanding difference, addressing the tensions and facing discomfort (Zembylas, 2015); such group work enabled "collective stands against authoritarianism". Furthermore, the authors challenge hegmonisation by using Queer pedagogy, which stands "against normalization - wherever it comes from" (Louro, 2001: 12) and, like critical pedagogy (Freire, 1985; hooks, 1994), questions the status quo, challenging taken for granted knowledge, and hierarchies of knowledge. The projects overtly challenged the mainstream authoritarian narratives, affording Fielding's (2010, p66) notion of 'restless encounters' of meaning making. Mattos and Cassal's article demonstrates that not only is education is a profoundly political act but, as all of us in this issue, argue, educational research can be too.

Liddiard, et al's contribution explores the minutiae of research processes that are often ableist and impede equity and participation. By examining two co-produced, participatory and arts-informed research projects, with young researchers with life limiting or life-threatening impairments, Liddiard demonstrates the benefits of intimacies within research as well as "cripping time"; thus, challenging dominant neoliberal individualistic and efficiency discourses. Moreover, crip time demands and allows relational practice, which is necessary to understand each other's needs (Katzman et al., 2020). Liddiard shows how co-researchers sharing vulnerabilities mitigates some of the traditional power relationships between researchers and the researched, especially with regard to researching disability, as disabled participants are often side-lined and do not have their voices heard. Liddiard's article exemplifies how relational practice in research resists and opposes neoliberal efficiency norms, enabling those who are often marginalised to speak out and challenge problematic narratives.

Twum-Danso Imoh's article illustrates the embedded problematic hierarchies between the researcher and the researched (Tuhiwai Smith, 2022) that we refer to earlier in our editorial. Twum-Danso Imoh explains how different conceptions of adulthood and childhood can be problematic and hegemonic. Through her research, we see how universities all too often embrace White, Western European, and North American conceptualisations of consent, childhood and adulthood but are ignorant of diverse cultural contexts and alternative positionings of children and young people in society. For example, Twum-Danso Imoh shows how the historical relational concepts and structures that inform the Ubuntu value system in Ghana, or the values of the UK Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, position children and young people very differently from traditional White, Western European, and North American conceptualisations of childhood and consent, where child participants may well be seen as vulnerable, unreliable witnesses who need protecting from adults, and also from themselves, often rendering them unable to take part in research. Instead, in Twum-Danso's research contexts, children are viewed as independent, agentic participants in their own right. Twum-Danso's findings show that connecting rights and reality in educational research requires methodological approaches that challenge notions of the child or young person as "the not

yet" (Biesta and Säfström, 2011: 543), repositioning children and young people as 'citizens of now', who should be actively engaged as experts in emancipatory discussions and debates on research ethical processes that affect them.

In the contribution by Malafaia et al, we see how they use a collaborative intergenerational approach to challenge traditional adult-centric power inequities and 'youth washing' (Thew et al., 2021) in climate change decision-making. The findings from their project, which developed democratic spaces (CiCi labs) show how such spaces are where the political emerges (Arendt, 1995) as young people challenge adult-led normative perspectives by questioning adult policymakers' decisions, shedding light on young people's everyday experiences of environmental issues in the places where they live. The childist standpoint adopted by the authors is fundamental in the development of their democratic methodology. It explicitly highlights young people's agency in relational education processes and the need for adults to learn from young people (Biswas, 2021). The authors argue that these collaborative, relational encounters make it harder for adult policymakers and academics to ignore young people's opinions and everyday realities when developing policy and research agendas in the field, as the research activities have been devised to position young people, not as a tokenistic 'sounding board', but as participants with the agency and power to make impactful change.

Finally, Green et al.'s contribution explores the experiences of three student researchers working on research project about school toilets in a sixth form (English school for 16–18-year-olds). In this article the young researchers, as co-authors, problematise the tensions created when carrying out a participatory project in a neoliberal school system. Time is not available apart from in small chunks, existing power relationships often impeded promises of participation and equality, however, despite the frustrations, the project demonstrated how student researchers can further democracy, albeit in a gradualist manner (Levitas, 2013). Furthermore, the authors explore the importance of space and how researchers might navigate it in order to "disrupt the culture of conformity" [page no needed when we know issue]. Whilst there are pressures on staff and students in schools, the authors offer hope that relationships and dialogue can be navigated in the name of democracy in even the most rigid of contexts.

These articles in combination emphasise the need for relational working whilst also challenging the status quo, whether it is about practice, policy or wider understandings about children, young people, or disability. Importantly, all the articles offer hope that democracy can be afforded within research projects, even if it in the smallest of local situations. All authors demonstrate their understanding of education and education research as necessarily political, and to engage with often messy and 'inefficient' practices in order to further democracy. Furthermore, the findings in this Special Issue reiterate our belief as editors and authors that democratic methodologies should connect rights and reality in educational research. We thus advocate for methodological approaches that challenge deficit notions of participants as somehow being "the not yet" (Biesta and Säfström, 2011:

543), and instead position participants as experts and educators in their own right, who should also be actively engaged in - and leading - emancipatory discussions and debates on research ethical processes that affect them.

Whilst the world might currently appear to be a problematic space for education research, we argue that democratic methodologies provide a route to challenge the pervasive individualistic narratives, narrow pluralism and neoliberal and increasingly authoritarian cultures in the spheres of Education and beyond. Far from despairing, however, the authors in this issue demonstrate that, with care, we can advocate and further democracy by creating different, more relational types of spaces through our research methods. It is thus imperative that we question and challenge traditional hierarchical education research methodologies and any accompanying institutional policies and practices that might impede thicker, more collaborative forms of democratic research. This editorial calls for the creation of more collective spaces to question and disrupt the neoliberal narrative discussed earlier, spaces in which we can reimagine educational research as, essentially, both relational and disruptive. We believe that this Special Issue provides such a space.

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