1. Empowering Voices: Participatory Research for Educational Equality

Juliette E. Torabian

1. Introduction: The imperative for inclusive inquiry

In recent years, participatory research (PR hereafter) has emerged as a powerful approach to addressing educational inequities and empowering underrepresented voices (Bang & Vossoughi 2016).

There are several underlying reasons for this trend. A primary reason is that despite progress, educational inequalities persist across different contexts (OECD 2024; Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2022) and in Europe, too (European Commission 2024). This is particularly the case for marginalised or disadvantaged communities and special needs learners despite efforts towards inclusive education (Bešić 2020). Educational inequalities – defined as dis/advantages in access to and uptake of education related to individuals' ascribed characteristics such as social background, gender, disability, or immigration history (Hadjar & Uusitalo 2016) – bear detrimental and long-term impacts on individuals, communities, and societies at large.

To tackle educational inequalities, there has been an increasing need for research-based evidence that can facilitate tailored and promising policies and practices tackling educational inequalities (Benz et al. 2021). This entails a multifaceted approach that not only addresses systemic barriers to equal access, participation opportunities, attainment, and transition, but also provides evidence from community-engaged and participatory research that meaningfully involves and amplifies the voices of excluded groups in research and policy processes (Benjamin-Thomas et al. 2018). This has led to a recognition of the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, including students, families, teachers and community members in the research process to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex issues at play (Johnson

& Parry 2016) and to ensure that research findings are relevant to their needs with improved and sustainable impact – at least this is what is desired.

In effect, there has been a growing awareness among educational and sociological researchers to democratise knowledge creation and to practice social justice in the design of their studies. After all, it is only sensible that "to enumerate individual characteristics and to treat the individual as if he were detached from his environment and hence and abstraction" (Boudon 1971, 48) contradicts the very objectives of social justice, equal opportunities, and diversity that researchers seek to promote and achieve. A fair research process does recognise that marginalised communities possess a wealth of knowledge and insights essential for understanding and addressing educational inequities (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017). As such, it differentiates itself from traditional research approaches that have often failed to adequately capture the perspectives of those studied.

Participatory research has, therefore, emerged as a collective attempt towards democratising research processes (Midgley et al. 2012) and elevating the knowledge and perspectives of those who are typically excluded from academic knowledge production. Unlike traditional research methods that "position" the object of the study as passive, participatory research aims to be open to socially situated perceptions and constructions of educational inequality (Rix et al. 2020) by research participants as active, engaged contributors to the research process. It hence includes their views from problem identification to data collection and analysis, and ultimately to the co-creation and dissemination of knowledge and solutions (Nind & Vinha 2013; Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018).

This chapter aims to explore how participatory research practices can empower marginalised communities and promote educational equality. In the following section, I will first delineate educational inequalities and the rationale for participatory research to address them. I will then discuss the theoretical foundations of participatory research and its key principles. This will be followed

by an analysis of various participatory methodologies relevant to educational research. In a next part, I will briefly review a few case studies to demonstrate the successful application of participatory research in addressing educational inequalities across different contexts. And finally, I will outline strategies for ethical integrity of participatory research projects in educational contexts.

2. Tackling educational inequalities through participatory research: The rationale

Despite progress, educational inequalities are well-documented phenomena across different national and regional contexts (Castelli et al. 2012). According to the OECD (2024), for instance,

> there has been good progress in educational attainment and outcomes, for example, with a significant drop in the share of 25–34 year olds without an upper secondary qualification, which has decreased from 17% in 2016 to 14% in 2023, in many countries.

Likewise, the Institute for Statistics (2017) reports on the expansion of access to education indicating that the global literacy rate among youth aged 15–24 rose from 83% in 1990 to 91% in 2020. However, these aggregate figures mask persistent gaps and multifaceted disadvantages faced by specific population groups.

Educational inequalities are multi-level (macro, meso, micro), intersectional, and multifaceted (Blanden 2020). They may be rooted in macro-level policy designs, meso-level institutional policies and practices as well as individual-level practices, educational choices, perceptions, and backgrounds. Educational inequalities manifest through disparities in access to quality education, educational attainment, and transition, as well as learning outcomes across various demographic groups (Tarabini et al. 2017). Studies have shown that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, racial/ethnic minority groups, immigrant and refugee communities, students with disabilities, and other marginalised populations are often "alienated" (Hascher & Hadjar 2018) and encounter challenges such as insufficient school resources, biased

curriculum and pedagogy (Davis-Cotton 2021), discrimination, and lack of culturally responsive support systems.

Hence, while some progress has been achieved in expanding educational access and opportunity, marginalised and underserved populations continue to face persistent systemic barriers and disadvantages that limit their educational opportunities and social mobility (Tarabini et al. 2017), which can be inter-generational in nature (Nennstiel & Becker 2023). In fact, evidence from research and across different contexts has consistently demonstrated a strong link between educational inequality and life chances (Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2012). For instance, the correlation between educational attainment and occupational disparities (Becker & Blossfeld 2021); the heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion among groups underrepresented in higher education and the critical role education plays in fostering social cohesion and development (Galindo & Rodríguez 2015); the higher risk of unemployment among less educated individuals (Neugebauer & Weiss 2018); the intergenerational transmission of educational (dis)advantages (Parsons et al. 2023); and even the association between lower educational outcomes and poorer mental and physical health (Remund & Cullati 2022; Walsemann et al. 2013).

Given the multifaceted and pivotal role of educational equality in determining an individual's life trajectory – and its wider impact on social justice – the academic examination of educational inequalities constitutes a significant research focus within the field of sociology. An early example of such research by Coleman (1968) depicted that among the schools studied, the gap in school resources was not as significant variable and that inequalities in educational achievement was due to the students' sociocultural family background), i.e., micro-level differences. To understand the roots of educational inequalities, researchers have also analysed (macro-level) educational policies to depict the ways educational equality is defined and the groups that are "problematised" in policy discourses across different contexts (Dunajeva 2022). In

a similar vein, research has focused on the institutional (meso-level) factors affecting students' achievement including the system of school-type differentiation (between-school tracking) and the level of standardisation (e.g., regarding central examinations and school autonomy) (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2010).

Participatory research: A path to understanding and addressing educational inequalities
Two key questions remain to be addressed regarding the importance of research on educational inequalities and how participatory approaches can help advance the understanding and addressing of these problems. These are discussed here below.

The prominence of research on educational inequalities is rooted in the idea of education as a public good and a "human right" (Morsink 2011). This means that education should facilitate social cohesion by providing inclusive systems and equal opportunities for all – regardless of their background and power relations (Bredo & Feinberg 1979). It shall, logically, remove the "hampering influences" of social inequalities as argued by Russell (1932) rather than reproducing and perpetuating the existing social dis/advantages (Erben 1979). Hence, educational inequality is fundamentally a human rights issue and in contradiction with the philosophy of education as a public good. As emphasised by Walker et al. (2019), "education has a vital role in empowering individuals, shaping their identities and enabling them to participate fully in the economy and society." What we are witnessing around the world, however, is unequal access to quality education and disparities in educational outcomes that profoundly compromise the life chances and well-being of affected populations, violating core principles of social justice and equality of opportunity.

Research on educational inequalities is, therefore, a reflection of sociologists' desire to facilitate social justice by illuminating how existing systems and policies serve to exclude or disadvantage certain groups and by informing efforts to expand inclusive

access, enhance equity, and promote the fulfilment of the right to education (Blanden 2020).

Although invaluable, earlier educational and sociological studies suffer from the same "epistemic injustices" (Omodan 2023) that researchers seek to analyse and tackle in schools, learning and teaching processes, policies, and curricula. In traditional research methods, the researcher maintains the role of an "expert" who objectively collects and analyses data, often overlooking the perspectives and experiences of the researched communities. That is, despite the best intentions of researchers and their attempts towards "reflexivity" (Khalid 2009), conventional research approaches may inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and marginalisation, thereby missing critical insights that could inform more inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices (Beckett 2009). These earlier forms of sociological research *position* the object of the study yet fail to treat them fairly by facilitating their *position taking* in research. Consequently, they fail to fully capture the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of marginalised students and their communities – i.e., those most directly impacted by educational inequities. And this is indeed contradictory to the very objective that sociological research on educational inequalities purports to achieve.

To break away from such epistemic injustices, a growing number of scholars have advocated for a participatory research approach to enhance our understanding of educational inequalities. Participatory research – although neither a magical bullet nor without limitations – is inherently grounded in principles of social justice and fairness (Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018). It recognises that research has the potential to be a tool for transformative action, shifting power dynamics, and amplifying the agency of under-represented communities. As such, it represents a critical departure from traditional, extractive models of research that may have – and perhaps even often – reinforced systemic inequalities. Instead, participatory approaches position the research process itself as an opportunity for critical reflection, capacity-building,

and collective problem-solving among participants (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017).

Respecting the rights and the voices of research subjects, participatory research prioritises active involvement of the communities being studied, positioning them as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere subjects (Bang & Vossoughi 2016; . This collaborative process not only gives voice to those who have historically been marginalised, but also leads to more relevant and impactful research outcomes (Tiffany 2006). By involving participants in all stages of the research, from framing the research questions to interpreting the findings, participatory approaches are better able to surface the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences that are essential for driving meaningful change.

In short, educational inequalities are deeply rooted in systemic barriers and the marginalisation of certain groups. Participatory research can be invaluable in generating evidence-based and contextually relevant solutions that elevate the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of marginalised students, families, and communities (Kindon et al. 2007). From "community-driven to community-informed research" (Vaughn & Jacquez 2020), PR is a collaborative, empowering, and socially just approach to knowledge co-creation, where researchers work in partnership with concerned communities to identify problems, design solutions, and drive positive change (Amauchi et al. 2021; Macaulay et al. 2013).

3. Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Research

Participatory research draws strength and direction from several intertwined theoretical traditions, each contributing unique perspectives and principles to its core philosophy. This section will delve into the theoretical roots of PR, focusing on critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and action research, while highlighting key concepts that underpin its transformative potential.

Participatory research is rooted in critical theory which emphasises the role of power relations, social justice, and the empowerment of marginalised groups in the research process. At its core, participatory research rejects the notion of the researcher as an objective, detached observer and instead positions them as collaborators and allies – or "cognitive activists" (Earl 2017) – in a joint effort to co-create knowledge and drive social change. Heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, particularly his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970),[1] critical pedagogy emphasises the importance of education as a tool for social transformation. Freire's concept of *conscientização* (developing critical consciousness) is central to PR. It involves empowering marginalised groups to critically examine their social realities, challenge oppressive structures, and become active agents of change. PR adopts this emancipatory focus, aiming to empower communities. It facilitates an understanding of their circumstances and shapes their narratives through mutual dialogue to influence decision-making processes that affect their lives (Snell et al. 2009). This empowerment is a crucial aspect of PR, as it enables marginalised groups to gain control over their own stories and have a direct impact on the decisions that impact them.

Feminist scholarship has also played a pivotal role in informing the fundamental values and practices that define the participatory research approach (Penzhorn 2005). Feminist scholars have long critiqued traditional research approaches for perpetuating patriarchal structures and silencing marginalised voices (Dankoski 2000). In contrast, PR's commitment to equitable partnerships, valuing of lived experiences, and active dismantling of hierarchies within the research process directly responds to these feminist concerns (Muhammad et al. 2014). In fact, by centring the perspectives of marginalised groups, embracing their diverse knowledges, and challenging dominant power structures, PR aligns

---

1 This seminal work critiques traditional "banking" education models and advocates for a problem-posing approach that empowers learners to become critical agents of social change.

with feminist efforts to create more inclusive, just, and emancipatory research approaches.

Another significant theoretical foundation of participatory research is the action research tradition which emphasises the cyclical and collaborative nature of research (Rearick & Feldman 1999). Action research emphasises collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, where researchers and community members work together to identify issues (Kuhne & Quigley 1997), co-create and implement solutions (McTaggart et al. 2017), and evaluate their impact. This iterative process allows for continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies ensuring that research remains grounded in the lived realities of the community and contributes to meaningful social change (Kapucu 2014). Action research's cyclical and iterative approach offers a valuable foundation for participatory research, providing a structured yet flexible framework for collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. The emphasis on working closely with community members to identify issues through dialogue (Flood 2007) facilitates continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies, ensuring that the research remains responsive to the evolving needs and lived experiences of the community. (Baum et al. 2006).

In addition, participatory research finds common ground with diverse critical, emancipatory, and liberatory traditions, such as community-based participatory research, Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies. These perspectives share a commitment to challenging dominant power structures, amplifying marginalised voices, and co-creating knowledge in the service of social justice. From a Foucauldian perspective[2] (Foucault 1980), participatory research can be viewed as a form of "counter-conduct" or a revamping of power relations

---

2 Foucault's work explores the interconnectedness of power and knowledge, arguing that knowledge is not neutral but is produced and deployed within power relations to shape and control individuals and societies. He examines how power operates through discourse, institutions, and practices to create norms, regulate behaviour, and define what is considered "true" or "normal" (Foucault 1980).

through knowledge co-creation. From a critical race theory and a Marxist perspective,[3] PR is a research approach (not a methodology nor an epistemology) that can support the de- and re-construction of societies (McTaggart et al. 2017) and help individuals and communities to resist and transform oppressive structures through collective inquiry and action (Etmanski & Pant 2007).

Taken together, these theoretical foundations – critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and action research – converge to form the robust philosophical underpinnings of participatory research. By embracing principles of social justice, empowerment, equitable partnerships, and collaborative knowledge production, participatory research aligns with the goal of transforming societal structures and promoting educational equity.

Key concepts in participatory research
At the heart of participatory research lies several core concepts that distinguish it from traditional research approaches and guide its transformative potential. These are briefly discussed here below.

Empowerment is a primary feature of participatory research. It involves creating opportunities for marginalised individuals and groups to gain control over the research process, shape the questions and goals, and actively participate in the co-creation of knowledge (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout 2010). As such, PR challenges traditional power dynamics and hierarchies, and in-

---

3 While Marxist theory focuses on class relations and the capitalist mode of production as the primary source of social inequality and oppression, critical race theory (CRT) focuses on race and racism as fundamental organising principles of society. Both theories offer critical lenses for understanding how power operates to create and maintain social hierarchies, though their focus and proposed solutions differ. Some scholars argue that CRT draws inspiration from certain Marxist ideas, particularly concerning power dynamics and social critique, while others emphasise the distinctions between the two. Both theories engage in deconstruction by exposing and challenging dominant narratives and power structures. However, their approaches to reconstruction differ. Marxism envisions a revolutionary transformation of society, while CRT focuses on legal and social reforms to dismantle systemic racism.

tentionally creates accessible spaces where the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of marginalised communities can be meaningfully heard, valued, and incorporated into the research and decision-making (Ramphele 1990). By centring the *agency* and *leadership* of marginalised stakeholders, PR seeks to dismantle oppressive structures and shift power imbalances, enabling these groups to shape their own futures and narratives (Torre et al. 2015).

Dialogue and mutual learning constitute another core element of participatory research. Rather than adopting a one-way, extractive approach to gathering information, PR emphasises reciprocal exchange, where both researchers and community members engage in a dynamic dialogue to co-construct knowledge This ongoing process of mutual learning allows for a rich exchange of diverse perspectives, the integration of varied knowledges and ways of knowing, and the continuous refinement of research questions and strategies. The dialogic and collaborative nature of PR facilitates a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, as all stakeholders contribute their unique insights and work together to shape the research process and outcomes (Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018). In fact, this collaborative knowledge co-creation is a defining feature of participatory research as it empowers marginalised communities to actively shape the research that impacts their lives.

Community ownership and control is also a defining characteristic of participatory research (Macaulay et al. 1999). Building genuine, equitable partnerships between researchers and community members requires a deep sense of mutual respect, trust, and a shared commitment to working collaboratively towards common goals that address the evolving needs and priorities of the community (Wells 2009). Such partnerships are built on principles of co-creation, where all stakeholders contribute their unique knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to shape the research process. By centring the perspectives, voices, and agency of marginalised community members, these collaborative partnerships challenge traditional power dynamics and create more inclusive,

empowering spaces for participatory inquiry, knowledge co-creation, and collective action towards social change.

To co-create knowledge, participatory research recognises and embraces the diverse forms of knowledge and expertise held by different stakeholders (Stern 2019). It values the lived experiences, local knowledge, and traditional wisdom of community members and practitioners, positioning this alongside academic and professional expertise. By integrating these multiple ways of knowing, participatory research creates a richer, more nuanced, and contextually grounded understanding of complex social issues (Ferreira & Gendron 2011). This approach challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge, acknowledging the unique insights and perspectives that can emerge when diverse stakeholders collaborate as co-creators of knowledge. Participatory research thus seeks to amplify marginalised voices, democratise the research process, and develop holistic solutions that are responsive to the complex realities faced by the communities involved (Powers et al. 2006).

In addition, PR follows an *iterative, cyclical process* of planning, action, observation, and critical reflection. This allows for continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies in response to emerging needs and evolving contexts (Macaulay et al. 1999). The flexibility and responsiveness inherent in this iterative process ensures that the research remains grounded in the lived realities of the community and contributes to meaningful, sustainable social change. Ultimately, participatory research is an inclusive, empowering, and transformative approach that seeks to challenge oppressive power structures, centre the voices and lived experiences of marginalised communities, and mobilise collaborative action towards social justice and equality (Amauchi et al. 2021).

4. Participatory research methods
Participatory research draws on a diverse array of methods that are specifically designed to facilitate inclusive, collaborative, and

empowering forms of inquiry. These methods are briefly outlined below, including their strength, limitations, ethical implications and practical considerations.

Participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a collaborative approach that engages community members as co-researchers. This means that researchers and community members work together to identify research questions, collect and analyse data, and implement actions based on the findings. It aims to generate knowledge that is directly relevant and beneficial to the community.

Like any other research approach, PAR has its own strengths and limitations. By raising the ownership of communities over research process it both ensures higher impact (Baum et al. 2006) and promotes social change and empowerment (Tetui et al. 2017). As such, PAR can lead to more contextually relevant and culturally sensitive findings as well as increased community engagement and social change (Tetui et al. 2017). However, it can also be time-consuming, requiring more resources and a PAR researcher may face challenges in navigating power differentials between themselves and community members. While conducting PAR, it is, therefore, crucial to ensure informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and navigating potential conflicts of interest as part of PAR ethical considerations. In practice, PAR requires extensive collaboration, flexibility, and time commitment from all stakeholders – which is not an easy task for a rushed researcher. In fact, the success of PAR lies in the imperative of building trust, establishing clear communication channels, and developing shared decision-making processes.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR). while both PAR and CBPR emphasise collaboration and community involvement, there are subtle yet important distinctions between them. Both aim to address community-identified issues and promote social change, but their scope and emphasis differ slightly.

PAR, as it was discussed above, is a broad approach to research that emphasises participation and action by members of communities affected by the research. It's a cyclical process involving research, action, and reflection with the goal of understanding

the world by trying to change it collaboratively. PAR's focus is on empowering communities to take control of the research process and generate knowledge that can be used to address their own concerns. The "community" in PAR can be defined broadly, encompassing any group of individuals with a shared interest or concern.

CBPR, on the other hand, is a more specific type of participatory research that explicitly focuses on community well-being (Amauchi et al. 2021). It emphasises the active role of the community in all aspects of the research process, from defining the research question to disseminating the findings. CBPR projects typically involve partnerships between academic researchers and community organisations, with the goal of achieving social transformation and social/environmental justice (Ferreira & Gendron 2011). In CBPR, the community participates fully in all aspects of the research process, starting with the community itself, which is often self-defined but can include geographic communities, communities with shared problems, or those with common interests or goals. CBPR also emphasises equitable partnerships, sharing power, resources, credit, results, and knowledge, with reciprocal appreciation of each partner's knowledge and skills at every stage (Viswanathan et al. 2004). One of the challenges of PAR, and likely CBPR as well, is ensuring stakeholders remain committed throughout the project – given the diverse perspectives and values that can make consensus difficult (Lenette 2022). Another challenge is gaining in-depth understanding of the community, especially when researchers come from different cultural backgrounds.

In essence, CBPR can be considered a specialised form of PAR with a particular focus on community well-being and a strong emphasis on equitable partnerships between researchers and community organisations (Shalowitz et al. 2009). While PAR can be applied to a wider range of research topics, both approaches share a commitment to community engagement, social change, and the empowerment of marginalised communities.

Photovoice and participatory theatre. Photovoice is a participatory visual research method that enables participants to document and reflect on their lived experiences through photography (Molloy 2007). Participants are provided with cameras and are trained to capture photographs that represent their perspectives on a particular issue or phenomenon (Novák 2010). Photovoice can be particularly effective in giving voice to marginalised youth and communities and raising awareness about social issues (Strack et al. 2004). Similar to other PR approaches, photovoice empowers participants to express themselves visually – even if they lack literacy skills. It can generate powerful and emotionally resonant data that can influence policy and practice (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017). Nonetheless, photovoice requires careful consideration of ethical issues around informed consent, participant safety, power dynamics, and the representation of vulnerable groups. Practical implementation of photovoice necessitates providing appropriate training and support to participants, as well as time and resources for reflection, discussion, and curation of the photographic data – particularly awareness raising on right to image (Pierce 2018). Obtaining informed consent for taking and sharing photographs, protecting participant identities, and ensuring respectful representation of sensitive topics are important ethical considerations. Among practical considerations reference can be made to providing participants with clear guidelines for taking photographs, facilitating group discussions about the images, and developing strategies for disseminating the findings are key practical considerations.

Participatory theatre is another participatory research method that engages community members in the research process (Mayfield-Johnson & Butler 2017). Participatory theatre involves collaborating with community members to develop and perform theatrical productions that reflect their lived experiences and perspectives on social issues. This method empowers participants to share their stories and perspectives through artistic performance which can be a powerful means of raising awareness and advocat-

ing for social change (Mosavel & Thomas 2010). Like photovoice, participatory theatre requires careful attention to ethical considerations such as safeguarding participant well-being, ensuring informed consent, and navigating the complexities of representing sensitive or traumatic experiences.

Community mapping. Community mapping is a participatory research method that involves creating visual representations of a community's physical, social, economic, cultural, or historical characteristics (Teixeira 2014). This process can help identify community assets, challenges, and priorities, and promote collective understanding and decision-making (Li et al. 2018). As a form of PR, community mapping can be a highly engaging and collaborative process that brings together diverse stakeholders. It can provide valuable insights into community dynamics and spatial relationships. As expected, community mapping can be time-consuming and require specialised software or artistic skills (Farley-Ripple et al. 2020). Ensuring accurate representation and avoiding bias in the mapping process is of vital importance, of' course (Pánek & Sobotová 2015). As a qualitative and anthropological approach, community mapping also needs to account for confidentiality and negotiated access to sensitive information. Protecting participant confidentiality, respecting cultural sensitivities (the "do no harm" principle[4]), and ensuring equitable representation of different perspectives are important ethical considerations (Antle 2017). To best implement community mapping, it is useful to provide training and facilitation, establish shared understandings of the process, and collaboratively interpret and disseminate the resulting maps.

Storytelling and narrative inquiry. Storytelling and narrative inquiry are participatory research methods that centre the lived

---

4 The "do no harm" principle in research ethics, often linked to the Hippocratic Oath in medicine, emphasises the researcher's responsibility to avoid causing physical, psychological, or social harm to participants. This includes minimising risks, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring informed consent. It also requires researchers to consider potential cultural sensitivities and power imbalances that could lead to unintended harm.