

## *Accessing a ‘Very, Very Secret Garden’: Exploring the Literary Practices of Children and Young People Using Participatory Research Methods*

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### *Abstract*

Despite the wealth of publications on the participation of children and young people in research, the connections between participatory research methods (PRM) and literacy studies remain unclear. This paper aims to understand why it is particularly pertinent to use PRM in literacy studies (particularly New Literacy Studies). In order to capture the complexity and plurality of these methods, we discuss two studies: one conducted with children (ages 7-10) in Santiago, Chile and the other with young people (ages 16-30) in Québec, Canada. We argue that by using PRM, researchers can support participants in the appropriation of an alternative and potentially empowering view of literacy.

### *Keywords*

participatory research methods; New Literacy Studies; children; young people; voice in research; literacy practices; views of literacy

### *Introduction*

While there is an ever-growing body of literature on the participation of children and young people in research, as well as the various interpretations of the concept of participation itself (for instance Hart’s, 1992 ladder of participation and subsequent adaptations; Tisdall et al., 2014) little attention has been paid to the connections between participatory research methods (PRM) and literacy studies. We, as researchers, had recurring discussions about what it meant to use participatory research methods in literacy studies. Despite the wealth of publications on participation in research, the connections between the two fields remain unclear. Beyond the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), we felt that there were other reasons why participation in research was particularly suited for literacy studies with children and young people. Our paper links current concerns associated with the participation of children and young people in research with core themes of literacy studies, specifically the New Literacy Studies (NLS).

Throughout this article, we use the term participatory research methods (PRM) to describe the extensive range of activities that are aimed at involving participants in research. Drawing on our own experiences of using PRM to look at children’s and young people’s literacy practices, this paper also aims to understand why it is particularly beneficial to use such methods in literacy studies. In order to capture the complexity and plurality of these methods, we analyse two studies, one conducted with children in Santiago (Chile) and the other with young people in Québec (Canada).

Based on our review of the literature in both fields (NLS and PRM), we have identified three key themes, all closely interlinked, that serve to inform our understanding of participation in literacy studies:

1. Domains of life and boundaries
2. Giving a voice to children and young people
3. Challenging dominant narratives

These three themes are introduced in tandem with the explanation of the data, as we feel that this format best facilitates our theoretical and epistemological discussion of PMR as it is directly informed by our empirical data. Before discussing the themes, we offer a brief overview of the PRM literature and present a NLS perspective on PRM. We conclude by offering some thoughts about the links between NLS and PRM.

### *Participatory Research Methods with Children and Young People*

There is an abundance of literature on participatory research with young people and children (Clark, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2011; Winter, 2006). Some of this work is rooted in the field of childhood sociology (Sommer, Pramling, & Hundeide, 2010) while substantial literature is located in the broad field of educational studies. Most studies draw on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in order to explain their uses of PRM (Finlay, Sheridan, & Soltyssek, 2013; Fleming, 2010; Holland et al., 2010; Petrie et al., 2006). The convention prompts researchers to reflect on ways to respect and involve young people in research, and to consider them as contributing subjects rather than merely objects of observation.

Participatory research can be rooted within minority and social rights, community empowerment, and democratic research (Hodge & Jones, 2000; Blumenthal, 2011). Epistemologically speaking, within PRM researchers conceptualise children and young people as social agents (Mason & Hood, 2011). However, children's agency should not be compared to adults' agency. James and Proust (1990) argue that children 'are not active in the ways in which adults are active' (p.4). Also, as Horgan (2016) stresses, childhood is not a homogenous phenomenon and can be experienced in a plurality of ways in diverse contexts and countries. She also adds that young people's rights cannot be detached from their 'social, economic and cultural contexts' as these directly affect 'the judgement of what is important to children and young people and also how children's voices are constructed' (Horgan, 2016, p. 3).

Beyond international legislation, Fleming (2010, p. 210) explains that there are four main reasons for using the PRM approach with young people: it causes researchers to always question the purpose of their study; it highlights power dynamics between researchers and participants: 'asking in whose interests it is being done' (ibid.); it encourages researchers to think about how their work can change the lives of children and young people; and it allows researchers to potentially have a more rigorous understanding of the context of their study by involving 'young people as "experts by experience"' (ibid.). Holland et al. (2010) argue that 'participatory research can make a central contribution, in providing an ethical, epistemological and political framework and in the potential for rich "findings"' (p. 360). PRM do not aim at producing 'better' data, but rather focus on creating a more equal power distribution and the enrichment of the data and findings.

From a methodological point of view, there are a wide continuum of understandings (see Hart, 1992) and ways of applying the participatory paradigm (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman,

2010). Some researchers consider participatory studies as those in which young people and children have simply been invited to take part (ibid.). In contrast, others involve young people and children in the ethical approval, design, data collection, analysis, writing (e.g. Petrie, Fiorelli, & O'Donnell, 2006) as well as dissemination stages of the research. Because of the changing nature of academia (for instance, funding bodies' expectations and time constraints, see Jeffrey and Troman, 2004) it is becoming increasingly difficult to adopt a participatory approach during all stages of a study (Franks, 2011). It is particularly challenging to involve children and young people in the design, ethical approval, and analysis stages. Franks (2011) suggests a 'pocket of participation' approach where children and young people are consulted as to when and how they would like to engage in the study.

Christensen (2004) notes that modern ethnographic research—in which participant observation is used—is fundamentally participatory because it involves a complex and constant negotiation of roles and power relationships between the researcher and the participants which do not necessarily fit the traditional adult-children power relationship. Cheney (2007, 2011) calls child-centred ethnography a participatory ethnography in which the main concern is 'to create spaces for meaningful participation to challenge broader structures of power' (Cheney, 2011, p. 167). Participatory ethnography is transformative (Cheney 2011), however, how this transformation occurs is part of the research process itself and the study, the researchers and the participants can be changed by it. This process of change might also underline the unpredictable nature of doing research with children and young people, which causes researchers to be more flexible and creative (Finlay et al., 2013).

In this article, we consider that a study is using PRM when it involves children and young people at different research stages and considers them as active participants. Doing so signifies that young participants are offered an opportunity to take ownership of the study (or of parts of it) through appropriate activities that can include, but are not limited to, talking, drawing, creating objects, playing, writing, taking pictures, leading visits, and many others depending on their interests.

### *New Literacy Studies and PRM: A Brief Overview*

This section describes PRM in relation to the New Literacy Studies (NLS), as it is important to establish a genealogy of the use of the PRM approach in literacy studies in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of its affordances and relevance to the field. According to Barton (2001), the NLS was developed in response to purely cognitive conceptions of what is reading and writing in academia and in society. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the NLS were inspired by several traditions surrounding literacy studies: 'teacher research in schools', 'community publishing', 'community development and popular education' as associated with Paulo Freire, feminist studies, 'oral historians', and educational action research (Hamilton et al., 1992, p. 107).

NLS researchers have used diverse approaches and methods to understand literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective. Historically, ethnography has been the preferred methodology (Papen, 2005) because it allows researchers to represent participants' perspectives in real-world settings and with a multi-method approach (Hamilton, 1999). However, ethnography, as it has traditionally been understood, does not 'fully represent the perspectives of [the ethnographers'] informants' (ibid., p. 431), and researchers' perspectives in general are often more dominant than the participants'. This concern has been taken into account in different ways, and

some NLS researchers have addressed it with various approaches and methods. Hamilton et al. (1992) explain that:

[p]articipatory research and action is the logical model for literacy work because of the philosophy behind the teaching and because learning literacy is about creating knowledge (in Freire's words: reading the world); strengthening voices that have been silenced (writing who you are) and telling others what you have discovered (reaching an audience). (ibid., p. 115)

Later, Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 5) further describe the PRM approach as 'transformative' and 'emancipatory' but they distinguish it from action research. They explain that '[c]rucial to a social approach to literacy is the fact that people make sense of it and that their conceptions of the nature of reading and writing affect their learning and use. The collaborative methodology is a logical extension of this approach' (ibid., p. 66). In order to achieve these goals, they developed a 'collaborative ethnography' where they explored different strategies for involving participants in the collection, decision making, analysis and interpretation of data (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton, 1999). During the data collection phase, they invited participants to collect documents and take photographs of their daily life. They then further involved them by inviting participants to discuss and analyse different types of data: interview transcripts, researchers' preliminary analysis (themes), and to prepare a 'pen-sketch of themselves' (Barton & Hamilton, 2012, p. 66). Barton and Hamilton diversified the range of research methods in adult literacy studies, adding a collaborative dimension to the ethnographic approach used in earlier studies (see Heath, 1983; Street, 1984).

More recent studies address the issue of participant involvement and use a variety of methods, such as photographs taken by participants themselves (Hodge & Jones, 2000), and literacy diaries kept by participants (Marsh, 2003). In a project called 'Literacies for Learning in Further Education' (LlLFE) (Ivanič et al., 2009) various creative and participatory methods were used in order to explore the role of literacy in the lives of college students (e.g. an icon mapping activity, clock activity, floor plan activity, and photographs). Mannion and his colleagues (2007) explain that these methods are a 'useful way of understanding the embodied situated and spatial experience of the respondent's world' (pp. 21–22). With traditional ethnography, these dimensions could be difficult to address, but as these examples show, there is a growing interest in understanding how literacies move across different contexts and spaces (Kell, 2006; 2011). One of the affordances of the PRM approach is that it can potentially give researchers an insight into these movements, and also into the ways people are reinterpreting literacies throughout time and across spaces.

Within a sociocultural view of literacy, a few studies have used PRM to study the literacy practices of children and young people. The work of Pahl and Rowsell (2010, 2011) on 'artifactual literacies' is a good example of innovative methods used with toddlers, children, and teenagers. Pahl and Allan (2011) argue that participatory research contributes to building an understanding of literacy coming from young people's perspectives. PRM encourage the participants' involvement because they can construct and shape the methods that inform this vision (Pahl & Allan, 2011, p. 193). Abbot and Gillen (1999) also emphasise the relevance of involving children under the age of three during data collection and in later stages of research. They explain involving participants allows them to create occasions for knowledge co-construction and challenges traditional views of literacy.

A wide range of methods are used to involve participants in research and enable them to undertake the role of ‘ethnographers of their own experience’ (Ivanič et al., 2007, p. 707). Even though different literacy studies have used several terminologies (e.g. collaborative research, democratic research, collaborative ethnography, etc.), they can all be situated under the umbrella of PRM. For example, Marsh (2004) set out an animation studio for four-year-old children in which they created animated films. Once the films were created, she discussed with the children their perceptions of digital compared to more traditional forms of literacy. Another example is the multi-method approach used by Clark (2005) and Clark and Moss (2011) that documented the narratives of five to seven-years-olds using digital technologies (Warren, 2008). We argue that these methods—without being framed as participatory—can be considered as PRM as they encourage children’s active participation in research and have been described as ‘frameworks for listening’ to young children (Clark & Moss, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, through our literature review we have identified three themes that are currently debated in the NLS and PRM fields: 1) Domains of life and boundaries, 2) Giving a voice to children and young people, 3) Challenging dominant narratives. We present the literature review related to these three themes alongside our discussion of the data. Before presenting the themes, we introduce our two studies.

### *Brief Overviews of the Two Studies*

The studies we refer to in this article were developed in two very distinctive contexts and involved participants of different age groups. Margarita’s study was conducted with children in Chile, and Virginie’s with young people in Québec (Canada). Yet, our studies are linked by a shared concern for—and understanding of—how to conduct research in a way that breaks the imbalance in the distribution of power between the researcher and the participants. In both of our studies, this issue is especially relevant as we worked with children and young people facing economic and social difficulties. In these contexts, the use of PRM provided us the opportunity to involve the research participants in a respectful way which in turn impacted the richness of our data. For both studies, PRM were at the core of the data collection process and the participants’ involvement was a concern that informed all the different stages of the research.

Since they involved children and young people, both studies had to provide strict ethical protocols which were reviewed and accepted by FASS Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University. The two studies also shared additional similarities, as they both required planning for fieldwork in a different country (Chile and Canada) from where we were based (UK). Both studies involved a lot of long distance travel and communication via emails with the selected field sites. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the identities of the people and organisations referenced. As both studies were carried out in different languages (French and Spanish), verbatim translations are used in this article.

In other respects, the two studies were carried out in highly contrasting contexts. For example, the participants in both studies belong to different age groups and cultural backgrounds, their experiences of schooling were dissimilar (e.g. still in school versus not attending school anymore), and they had contrasting relationships with their families and social networks (e.g. living with family members versus living on their own). Margarita’s study was conducted in two schools located in two different local government districts of Santiago, the capital of Chile. Margarita’s study focuses on understanding the role of literacy in so called ‘disadvantaged environments’ and the interplay between home and school-based literacy practices and writing. Approaching the study of literacy from a social perspective, this research takes into consideration



social practices and beliefs related to reading and writing (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). PRM methods were adopted in order to involve the community (parents, teachers and students) and understand their literacy beliefs and literacy practices. Data collection was carried out between August and December 2012 and the study participants were 7- to 10- year-old pupils. The research design was framed within an ‘Explanatory Design-participant selection model’ (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman & Hanson, 2003). In the first stage, 228 children (in 6 classes) were asked to write or draw on a topic of their choice and to answer a set of multiple-choice questions on their beliefs about literacy and literacy practices. The second stage used PRM in a focussed case study involving 19 children and some of the adults involved in their literacy-related activities at home and school.

Virginie’s study was conducted in two community-based organisations—here named Le Bercail and L’Envol—in Québec, Canada. The main research aim was to understand the relations between the literacy practices used in community-based organisations and those of the young people who attended their activities. The community-based organisations participating in this study offered services to young people aged 16 to 30 who experienced difficulties in various areas of their lives such as employment, accommodation, family and social relationships, mental and physical health, and drug and alcohol consumption. The services offered varied from a youth shelter for runaways, supervised apartments, structured workshops, artistic and cultural activities (e.g. art gallery and theatre), to career and counselling services. Virginie’s study involved two main phases of data collection. The first was conducted in April-May 2012 and consisted of an intensive period of participant observation, focusing mainly on group activities. In addition, 21 participants were interviewed individually (14 young people and 7 youth workers). The second phase took place in mid-April 2013 and involved five group workshops organised as a form of ‘member reflection’ (Tracy, 2010) with eight young people and six youth workers. The majority of the participants who took part in the second phase also participated in the first one.

### *Discussion of the Data*

In the following sections, we explore three key themes: 1) Domains of life and boundaries, 2) Giving a voice to children and young people, and 3) Challenging dominant narratives. Our discussion of these themes intertwines elements of literature review with empirical data.

#### *Domains of Life and Boundaries*

Several studies have documented children’s and young people’s literacy practices across different domains of life, generally across home and school (Heath, 1983; Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Drury, 2014; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). These studies highlight a considerable mismatch between what young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are doing with literacy at home and the kind of practices used and valued at school. This type of study requires researchers to access the intimate lives of participants: visiting their homes, talking to their families, seeing personal artefacts, etc. By doing so, literacy researchers can understand how literacies move across different domains of life—what Kell (2011, p. 613) calls the ‘traffic of texts’—as well as how they are interpreted and used differently depending on the context. From a PRM perspective, accessing participants’ private lives can represent an important challenge. What if the young people do not want to let us in? What if they do not want to show us everything?

A youth worker in Virginie’s study mentioned that young people would rarely show her their personal writing (such as personal diaries, poems, love letters, etc.). She said that these were like a ‘very, very secret garden’ for young people. Another youth worker in the same study also

mentioned that if young people shared such texts it would be a clear sign that the youth worker had managed to create a strong relationship of trust with them. Christensen (2004, p. 172) explains the importance of being “let in” on secrets, particular games or “dubious” practices by children’ during fieldwork. This requires spending time with the young people in order to build positive relationships with them.

Margarita conducted home observations with children in Santiago, Chile. During these visits, the children became guides to their ‘own territory’ (e.g. home and backyard) and only some of the children allowed Margarita to visit their bedrooms. Prior to those visits, Margarita had spent time with the children in their classroom and had negotiated the terms of the visits with the children and their parents. This echoes Coad and her colleagues’ (2015) work about home observations. They explain the importance of early engagement with the children before the home visit so that the children can feel listened to and considered:

Giving the child free rein to lead the conversation means that all the authors of this article have been introduced to an array of pets, important toys or other pursuits such as computer games or videos. Although time consuming, it is important to convey to the child that their individual thoughts and experiences are valued before the more formal part of the interview is started and data are collected. (Coad, Gibson, Horstman, Milnes, Randall, & Carter, 2015, p. 436).

The children in Margarita’s study showed her a great variety of belongings such as toys, computers, books, videos, magazines, etc. and anything they considered important (as exemplified by Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Bernardita’s favourite toys

While this sharing yielded information that did not necessarily contribute to the aim of the study—observing home literacy practices—it showed that trust had been established and contributed to the solidification of Margarita’s relationship with the children.

Conducting fieldwork on various sites also means that as researchers we are entering places with a different ‘social geometry of power and signification’ (Massey, 1994, p. 3), that is to say where people have different roles, power relationships, experiences, perceptions, etc. This relates to what Horgan (2016) mentions about contexts shaping children’s and young people’s judgement and voice (see also Spyrou, 2011). For example, when working with children contacted through the school system, Margarita took into consideration that the child might have felt pressured or obligated by the school to participate in the study. This issue was approached by giving the children enough autonomy and creating a safe space where the children were able to state their concerns or express their unwillingness to participate either in the full study or certain parts of it. Similarly, Virginie conducted research interviews with some young people in their flats, but always offered a public place as an alternative in case they felt uncomfortable with showing her their home.

Accessing children’s and young people’s various domains of life can be challenging, but once a researcher has access to the young people’s intimate lives, how can they make sure that their voices are being heard? We suggest that it entails more than just letting them lead the visits or interviews; it requires truly engaging in dialogue.

### *Giving a Voice to Children and Young People*

Hamilton (2012, p. 61) explains that the idea of giving voice to a group of people is used as a ‘way of talking about political participation and power sharing’. Pyett (2002) mentions that the voices of ‘vulnerable or marginalised’ groups are generally not heard in society and often they are given limited power during the research process. From our perspective, giving voice also implies offering opportunities for children and young people to talk about what is really important to them and to be listened to, not only by researchers but also by a larger audience that could include teachers, parents, policy-makers and others in positions of authority. From a literacy studies point of view, this signifies taking into account what young people and children consider important in terms of literacy in their everyday lives. The NLS has a long tradition of looking at everyday life literacy practices (for example, shopping lists, form filling, train timetables, etc.) and not only literacy practices that are valued at school or in the job market (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Papan, 2005).

Central to the process of giving voice is to initiate a dialogue or a conversation with the young people. According to Christensen (2004), researchers have to understand and enter children’s ‘cultures of communication’ in order to create a fruitful dialogical research process. Similarly, Ulvik (2014) considers conversation as central to participation in research and suggests ‘three possible analytical perspectives on the relation between conversations and participation: conversations as means for participation, participation as a theme for conversations, and conversations as a form of participation’ (p. 196).

Dialogue and conversation were central to both of our studies. In the initial interview with each child, Margarita tried to make them feel at ease by validating and encouraging their opinions. At the end of the interview, she asked them to reflect on each of the research questions. By doing so, Margarita intended to promote the children’s voices in the research. This strategy proved to be fruitful as following the individual interviews, the children were visibly more confident. Throughout the study, Margarita sustained this dialogical process with the children in the formal research contexts and also through informal conversations carried out at school events or other



occasions. Margarita's understanding of the children's cultures of communication in her study was facilitated by her knowledge of the context. Her own schooling experience was similar to that of the children participating in the study. She also grew up near one of the participating schools, which also informed her understanding of the research context and children's cultural background. Yet, Margarita took into account the inherent imbalance of power between adult and child in a research context (West, 2007).

Virginie's study used literacy artefacts during the interviews with the young people. Virginie asked participants to bring an object related to their personal use of literacy. For example, some showed her a personal diary, a book, poems, a mobile phone, a tattoo, etc. The participants then explained what the object was and why it was significant to them. This method was inspired by Pahl and Rowsell's work on 'artifactual literacies' (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Pahl, 2004). The use of literacy artefacts during the interviews provided a way of exploring what young people see as important in terms of literacy in their life and to enter their 'cultures of communication' (Christensen, 2004). This method was useful in both collecting rich data and in building better relationships with the participants. By talking around a literacy artefact, Virginie had the opportunity to better understand how young people's literacy practices evolved through different spaces, time periods, and interactions with members of their social networks.

Our studies confirm that literacy is a topic closely attached to people's perception of themselves. Barton and Hamilton (1998) in their landmark study '*Local Literacies*' note that '[t]he idea of reading and of being a reader was imbued with values, just as the idea of writing and being a writer was.' (158) Participants compared themselves to others saying that they were 'good readers', 'avid readers' or were more 'doers than readers' (ibid.). These perceptions can be deeply engrained in people's understanding of themselves as learners since literacy and education are generally closely associated with one another (Papen, 2016). This relationship with literacy (or *rapport à l'écrit*, Besse, 1995) originates in early childhood and is subsequently shaped by people's experience at school but also in other domains of life (family, leisure, work, friends, etc.). It is also largely influenced by the dominant narratives about literacy skills and what counts as literacy in society.

### *Challenging Dominant Narratives*

In her book entitled '*Literacy and the Politics of Representation*', Hamilton (2012, p. 2) looks at how 'literacy is imagined and embedded within everyday practices and how it is implicated in the ordering of social life'. She uses the term 'narrative' to refer to stories and representations that people believe in and circulate about literacy. She explains that: '[s]ome of these narratives are so familiar that it is difficult to get beyond them and the contradictions they embody to think in a fresh—perhaps more effective—way about the power of the written word' (ibid., p. 3). Papen (2016) mentions that the most common view of literacy is to consider it as a set of skills—knowing how to read and write—that must be acquired individually. This narrative is currently dominant in Western societies and is largely encouraged by large scale literacy surveys and tests (e.g. PISA and PIAAC) that categorise people on a 'ladder' based on what they cannot do rather than what they can do with literacy (Tett, Hamilton, and Crowther, 2012, p. 2). The skills view of literacy is dominant in schools and, more often than not, teachers and learners also adopt (perhaps unconsciously) this perception. Hamilton (2012, p. xiii), reflecting on years of work in literacy studies mentions:

I have met the pervasive view of literacy colonised by education as a skill to be ‘banked’ (in Paulo Freire’s terms) and worked over many years to articulate an alternative theory of literacy as social practice. Once people become familiar with this theory, it changes perceptions and is welcomed by learners and teachers. But the ideas have to be explained to those outside of the field over and over again, so strong is the hold of the dominant discourse (the schooled literacy approach) on the contemporary imagination. (ibid.)

This signifies that what young people and children consider important in terms of literacy in their lives is likely to be influenced by this dominant skills view perspective. This raises important issues from a PRM perspective; how can we as researchers access young people’s ‘authentic voices’ (Spyrou, 2011)? As NLS researchers, how can we present some alternative narratives to the dominant skills view of literacy without imposing such perspectives on the participants?

Margarita had to face such a dilemma during her fieldwork. The children and their parents (or guardians) perceived school literacies as the standard of good practice at home. They discouraged any practices that were not related to school and relegated their understanding of learning to the school practices. In this sense, they challenged Margarita’s vision of literacy (which could be framed within a sociocultural approach). Margarita and the participants had to come to a common understanding of the meaning of literacy and the purposes of the study. The vast majority of the children expressed their opinions about preferring a more functional view of literacy (e.g. reading textbooks or completing school writing tasks) that only occasionally included a sociocultural understanding of it. In this context, the participatory dimension was a vital tool for the researcher in coping with this issue. By making the participants aware of the relevance of their everyday literacy practices (e.g. during home visits), they felt more accepting towards them. Margarita’s dissemination stage included a leaflet that presented a co-constructed view of literacy. The leaflet had a double purpose: to disseminate this understanding of literacy and provide guidance about how to improve students’ performance (which was related to the children’s and parents’ concerns), and to empower the children and parents by validating their practices and thoughts. This leaflet was distributed at the general annual school meeting. Margarita’s study worked as a bridge to promote a better understanding between the parents, the school, and the pupils.

Another example of the negotiation of a co-constructed view of literacy can be found in Virginie’s study. She organized a workshop with the young people that aimed to map their literacy practices and to help them understand the literacies they associated with various dimensions of their lives. This specific activity was strongly inspired by the LfLFE project and their ‘Icon Mapping Exercise’ (Ivanič et al., 2009; Mannion & Miller, 2005). The young people were divided into small groups of two or three. The groups received a pile of images representing different literacies. They were then asked to classify the pictures according to the different domains of their lives with which they associated the images. Virginie encouraged the young people to draw their own lines between the different domains of their lives. They were free to use any wording they wanted to describe these domains. Figure 2 shows a map created by three young men at L’Envol—Cédric, Jacques and Richard.

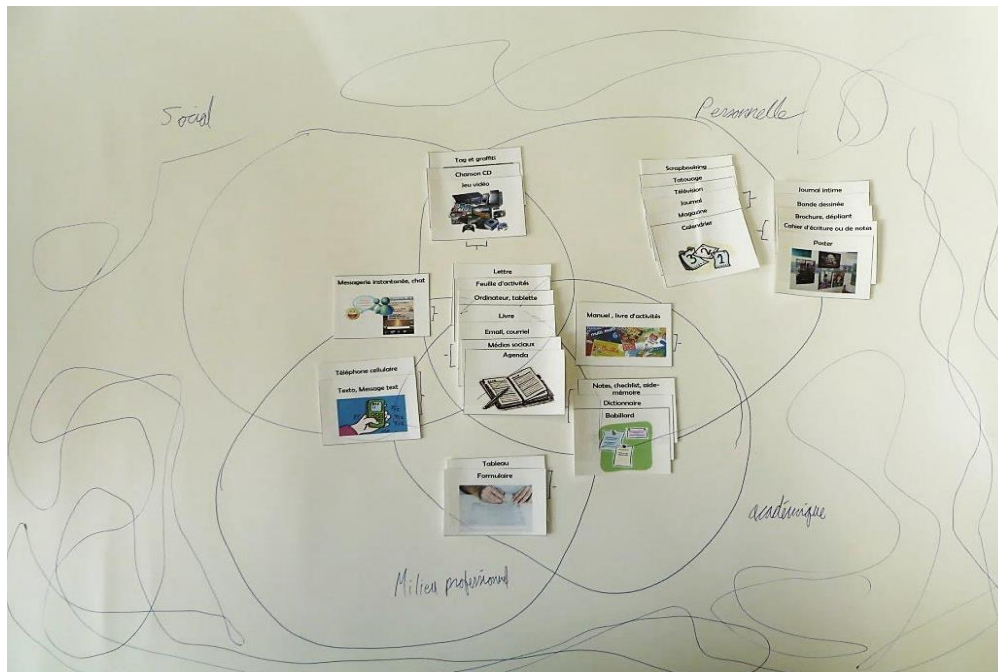


Figure 2. Literacies and domains of life according to Cédric, Jacques, and Richard

After these activities, the young people were invited to analyse their map and to draw some conclusions about it. Virginie and the young people then turned to the theory, discussing some of the concepts (for instance, literacy practices) in a more informal way. The young people's analysis was very rich and interesting. For example, Cédric explained that 'literacy is mainly a form of communication', even in the case of tattoos. He observed that, depending on the context, people will use and value literacy differently. Cédric added "Literacy is present in all the domains of your life, and this, whoever you are". This made him wonder about 'illiterate' ("*analphabètes*") people and how they can cope with literacy demands in their everyday lives. Despite the fact that the young people's analysis highlighted the importance of the social nature of literacy, a skills view of literacy was also present in their narratives. Some young people categorised most of the cards under the 'school' domain. They were also surprised about some of the cards distributed at the beginning of the activity (e.g. tattoos) and did not understand how or why they were related to literacies. Virginie's cards influenced their analyses and guided them toward a more sociocultural understanding. The comment made by Cédric about 'illiterates' might also suggest that literacy was conceived as a set of skills that one has or does not have. This suggests that the young people's representations of literacy, prior to the activity, were primarily influenced by a 'schooled literacy approach' (Hamilton, 2012, p. xiii).

In light of our research experiences, it is important to also take on board these more functional perspectives of literacy and not to look down on them in a judgmental way. As explained in the example taken from Margarita's study above, a dialogical process needs to be undertaken in order to negotiate a co-constructed view of literacy which also includes the participant's concerns. PRM can be used, as in Virginie's example, to present a broader view of literacy which can open up alternative narratives about literacy and its importance in young people's everyday lives. From our point of view, a concern that underpins NLS work is to make sure that people, and in this case children and young people, do not come to think that they are not readers, writers, and more generally good learners because their literacy practices are different from those at school. PRM

allow NLS to present alternative narratives while considering children's and young people's plural perspectives on literacy.

### *Conclusion*

Involving participants in research is an important concern for NLS researchers, and this paper has shown that participatory methods can be used in various positive ways, using different terminology and strategies. We argue that there is a need to be more explicit about using a participatory stance in order to put forward the participatory dimension of literacy studies. This paper argues that even though several terminologies (e.g. collaborative research, democratic research, collaborative ethnography) have been used in literacy studies they can all be situated under the umbrella of PRM. PRM are suitable to support literacy studies since they allow participants to explore different narratives about literacy. This is particularly relevant considering that a skills view of literacy still prevails in schools and in society in general, especially in discourses about people from so-called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. By using PRM, researchers can support participants in the appropriation of an alternative and potentially empowering view of literacy.

Politically and epistemologically speaking, PRM can contribute to giving a voice to people who are not usually represented in public narratives. Public and policy narratives about children and young people from so called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds frequently make assumptions about these young people's lives, problems, and skills, especially literacy or language-related ones (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2015). PRM can offer possibilities to counteract these disempowering discourses and highlight children's and young people's real literacy needs and uses of literacy. This also relates to Hamilton et al.'s (1992) understanding of the PRM used in their early work. For them, these methods were ways of 'reclaiming voice, breaking silence—allowing perspectives, experiences to be spoken and heard that have not been present in traditional research' (ibid., p. 113). We suggest that PRM also allow participants to position their perceptions, interests and practices right at the centre of the study. In this sense, the role of the researcher is to facilitate, guide, provide tools and support the participants throughout the research in order to give them a voice.

Also, from our experiences, we believe that PRM help in building meaningful relationships. As illustrated by the descriptions of PRM used in our studies, participants felt considered and respected. Some participants directly mentioned to us that they appreciated the way the studies were conducted—specifically the fact that their contributions were taken into consideration. Striving for respectful and equalitarian relationships in research is even more important while working with children and young people. Fleming (2010, p. 215) notes that power relationships tend to be 'superimposed' by researchers onto participants and also from adults to young people. We also believe that power relationships can be emphasized by the precarious situations the children and young people were experiencing. PRM have the potential to counteract this unbalanced distribution of power.

As part of our reflections as researchers using PRM, we understand that engaging in a dialogical research process means acknowledging and respecting that some participants might not be interested in engaging in the same way as we planned and hoped they would. We acknowledge what Finlay, et al. (2013, p. 137) call the 'unpredictability of ethnographic research with young people', meaning that researchers have to be willing to modify their research design in order to address participants' needs and take into consideration their inputs. In our respective research projects, we both experienced situations during which we had to adapt ourselves to the needs

expressed by the participants. By allowing participants to shape the research according to their own interests, we hope that they were able to take ownership of it. Certainly, it is difficult to claim that our studies totally empowered the participants, and we are not assuming this. Yet, we suggest that PRM have contributed to creating a more balanced distribution of power within the studies and also encouraged the participants to value their literacy practices.

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