Introduction

The origin of this book comes from my life story. As a child, one of my favourite games was pretending to be a teacher, and I wanted to be one. My sister was usually a pupil, with my two aunties the 'naughty' ones. I had a board and what seemed like loads and loads of stationery. That last bit never changed (and never will!). I was generally always a very good student and I didn't do the adolescence bit very well, to be very honest. I was in therapy for over 10 years, and I loved having an hour of my life where somebody sat down and listened and cared about what I had to say (not that I did not have that in my life; it was just different). Therapy saved me from having a very different story. The time came when I had to decide what I wanted to be 'for real' this time. My auntie (one of the naughty pupils and basically a person who was a significantly positive influence in my life) suggested that if my goal was to help children maybe I could do that if I became a psychologist. So here I am, a psychologist writing about research methods (so that plan did not work out so well either).

Generally, I managed to stay away from the subject of adolescence and anything to do with it for as long as I could (and that was the plan forever and ever). Then I ended up doing my PhD and the topic of illness, cancer and families came up as available to research, which I was very interested in. This project, however, involved adolescents. It was certainly not my first choice. Talking to people or, more probable, talking to myself, I decided to try this adolescence "thing" again; if anything I could learn a thing or two, and I could always rely on the fact that I was not one of them anymore.

To cut a long story very short, I worked with adolescents who were experiencing maternal cancer. I loved it. I got to know some of them and they were smart, resilient, kind, strong and basically just wonderful. Working with them healed a difficult time in my life. I liked them (I still really do!). Some of them only needed somebody to sit and listen

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to them for an hour, which was not a big ask. They have a lot of interesting things to say, if they are allowed to.

I then worked in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway, where children and adolescents were the centre, the ethos, the language spoken, a language that I learnt to speak myself watching them design their own research, present at conferences, film their own dissemination videos, talk to policy makers ... in fact, just children and adolescents taking over their worlds and making it better for themselves and others. And it was really fascinating to watch them do it!

So, this book comes from my conviction that participatory research with adolescents is interesting, useful and important. The technology aspect is an area I am interested in personally and is one that adolescents are captured and fascinated by (kind of a win-win situation!), and health is my other favourite topic.

As researchers and mostly as human beings we have an ethical duty to make sure the adolescents we work with are better off than they were when we met them. Evidently that means not worse and not the same, but better, stronger, wiser, happier, prouder... This is independent of methodology and methods, world views, experiences and beliefs; this is an ethical duty as adults. Actions and changes in policy and practice can take a long time; however, providing feedback and a clear route of how the change will be achieved is fundamental for adolescents involved in research to know.

Stafford et al. (2003) described primary school children as enthusiastic about being consulted about their opinions by adults, while secondary school adolescents were not. The experiences of consultation and participation may not be positive ones, particularly if they are not representative and if they lack any impact. 'A bad experience of consultation can result in cynicism about future attempts, a good experience can lead to more positive attitudes' (Stafford et al., 2003, p. 363). This a book about ensuring that participation and consultation with adolescents is a positive experience for them – not perfect, just positive. You may have one chance; be sure you use it wisely.

This book is focused on participation, which suggests that it is coming from a perspective where participation is considered a 'good thing'; however, I wish to give careful consideration as well to circumstances and situations where participation may not be a good thing. Farthing (2012) described some of the theories and corresponding criticisms of participation. Its limitations are also real, in that it can be unhelpful to individual adolescents and to adolescents as a social group (Farthing, 2012).

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Researchers should be very aware that 'consulting poorly is worse than not consulting at all' (Stafford et al., 2003, p. 372).

Participation is supported by a rights-based approach. Participation is good because it is a right of the adolescent, and good societies are those which adhere to international legal obligations that mandate their rights be respected. Participation can also be a form of social control, inviting adolescents to participate to ensure they support specific views, which is a violation of their right to freedom and equality (Farthing, 2012).

Empowerment is another justification for participation, supported within a democratic and inclusive society. According to Esau et al. (2016) empowerment is multifaceted and may have different meanings to different cohorts such as scholars, practitioners and the public. Empowerment in the context of health can be defined as 'an act of granting autonomy, a process of granting power and control over health outcomes, or as psychological state of feeling enabled' (Esau et al., 2016, p. 60). Understanding what adolescents identify as being important to their health is fundamental for health promotion efforts to be successful (Esau et al., 2016). Citizen engagement, public participation and the involvement of people with lived experience to redesign and improve health systems represents the new 'Zeitgeist – the spirit of our times' (Palmer et al., 2019, p. 247), therefore this book comes at a critical time.

The counterargument for empowerment would be that participation can be a way to subjugate adolescents to bring them under more social control. Empowerment may be undesirable in children and adolescents, assuming that there are things they cannot do or cannot understand 'before their time'. There are situations whereby experts or adults may know best and produce better outcomes (Farthing, 2012).

Participatory research can build a sense of trust and collaboration between researchers and participants which enables a more inclusive and equitable research process (Labusch et al., 2024). Participation can also be a way to improve policy, practice and service delivery. This argument, however, is justified by a neoliberal society where citizens are consumers of state services. Both adolescent knowledge and the experience of professionals are needed to achieve efficient outcomes to improve service delivery (Farthing, 2012). Fox (2013) commented that good participatory research should be a 'threat' to the institutions and powerful forces which mediate adolescents' lives and, I would add, participatory research should question the current status quo and ensure the lives of adolescents will be changed for the better as a result of the research at an individual level (at least) and at an institutional level (ideally).

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Participation can also be justified from a developmental perspective. The argument in favour is that participation enables adolescent individual and personal development. Radical critiques suggest that this can lead to quietening opposing voices by developing more social citizens (Farthing, 2012).

So overall, beyond debating who is right or wrong, it is more useful for researchers and adolescents to be aware of these arguments (for and against participation) and how they may be relevant or not in a specific context and time. Both adolescents and researchers are entitled to make informed decisions. By no means is it the intention of this book to promote a passive approach to adolescent participation but instead a critical and evidence-based one that will maximise the best possible outcomes for adolescents as individuals and us researchers as part of the same social group. Defining participation is challenging; the book suggests degrees of participation is a better approach and a valid one. Participation happens within a political, social, legislative and specific time as well as between individuals with different beliefs, needs, characteristics, and well … challenges in this complex scenario are expected. Anticipate challenges but also look forward to overcoming them, making participation part of your world, and enjoying this work as well.

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