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RESEARCH ARTICLE

We Need to Talk about Racism: Co-constructing Research with Young People from Multilingual Chinese Backgrounds

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Abstract

This paper, co-authored by two adult academics and three young researchers aged 11 to 16, investigates the authors' collective experiences in a participatory research project about growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage and migration background, where race and racism emerged as key themes. Drawing on critical dialectical pluralism and the concept of "reflexivities of discomfort," we explore how co-constructing research with children and young people can enrich the research process. Despite the intricate and often opaque nature of discussing racism, especially anti-Asian racism, with children from migration backgrounds, this study advocates for participatory research as a critical tool for uncovering these complexities, paving the way for more open and meaningful conversations. In collaboration with young researchers, we reevaluate the role of research and researchers in discussing racism, (de)construct children as experts of their racialized experiences, and imagine the future of researching racism with children through what we call "collective reflexivity"—a practice of open discussions that highlight young people's positionalities, experiences, and insights. Through practices that protect individuality and value personal experience, our work makes a methodological contribution by offering "collective reflexivity" and co-authorship as a pathway that ensures children are not viewed as "representatives," but valued for their positionalities, encouraging more engaged and critical conversations on race and racism with them.

Keywords: Participatory research; racism; children; multilingual; co-authorship

Introduction

In this paper, we outline how we—a group of researchers consisting of two academics and seven young co-researchers (aged 11–16) from migration backgrounds—considered race, racism, and marginalization within the parameters of a research project focusing on multilingualism, identity, and belonging. We draw on critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013) and Pillow's (2003)

Table 1. Brief author biographies

Name	Age at time of research	Brief biographical note
Cristal	15	*Hi, I'm Cristal and I'm Chinese. I was born and raised in England, and I've only been to China on holiday. At home I speak Cantonese and English, in my Chinese school I speak Mandarin. I love music and playing the guitar.*
Sophie	16	*My name is Sophie and I am half chinese. My family come from a small Chinese community on the island of Mauritius and so we speak a range of languages. In my free time I love to play the piano and violin (including in orchestras), build models or to cycle in the peak district.*
Haochen	11	*Hello, my name is Haochen and I am Chinese. I was born in China and came to United Kingdom, which is my home. I speak Mandarin in my family and in my chinese school. I like reading books and learning more about my heritage.*
Yue	29	*I am a Chinese-English bilingual researcher. I first moved to the UK as an international student and have continued living here since. My research focuses on the wellbeing and identity of Chinese heritage speakers.*
Sabine	49	*I am a German-English bilingual researcher, with a research focus on the intersectionality between heritage language, identity, and belonging, especially in children, and their agency as part of growing up multilingual. I am the mother of a bilingual child and learner of Mandarin Chinese.*

"reflexivities of discomfort" in linking participatory research with children to social justice, and extend this by using co-authorship with some of our young co-researchers as a pathway to authenticity. Co-authorship, for us, is a matter of extending our collaboration as co-researchers from conceptualizing the research through to its dissemination across all channels, including academic ones. While the original research project specifically focused on the experiences of young people growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage, this paper in particular focuses on our joint experiences of participatory research and co-production, with the aim of theorizing and articulating how our various practices as co-researchers improved the research overall.

In the following, we first connect our work in more detail with the field of racism work with children, before giving a brief outline of the study itself, and finally focusing our discussions on how our collaboration with children as co-researchers (including co-authorship), through what we call "collective reflexivity," is enhancing work in participatory research contexts. We conclude by offering critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013), collective reflexivity, and co-authorship as a symbiotically advantageous approach to participatory research. Our paper thus makes a direct contribution to methodological thinking in the emerging space of co-research with children and young people and the extension of this space that presents itself through co-authorship, specifically within the context of research taking place within racialized and ethnic minority communities.

Participatory Research with Marginalized Children and Young People

Participatory research represents a paradigm shift in how we engage with children and young people, challenging traditional power dynamics and moving beyond viewing them as passive recipients of adult-imposed decisions (Yorke and Swords 2012). Grounded in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, this approach emphasizes the importance of children's perspectives and their right to participate in matters that affect their lives (Lundy 2007). As Christensen and James (2008, 2) note, "the focus was on research *with*, rather than *on*, children, in a desire to position children as social actors who are subjects, rather than objects of enquiry." This shift from conducting research *on* children to research *with* them explicitly acknowledges and seeks to dismantle adult-dominated knowledge structures (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor 2018). In doing so, participatory work intentionally disrupts some of the power imbalances between adults and children, enabling young people's voices to inform and shape research in ways that reflect their lived experiences and priorities.

Notwithstanding this current trend on participatory research, the actual inclusion of marginalized and racialized young people remains limited (McDonnell 2021). While the UN committee asserts that *all* children have the right to participate in relevant processes, marginalized youth are often systematically excluded from accessing the same opportunities and resources available to others (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor 2018). This exclusion highlights the importance of engaging these young people as equal partners to ensure their involvement is meaningful. In North America, there is an emerging movement in participatory action research involving racialized youth, elevating their voices in resistance to dominant narratives and fostering antiracist activism (Anne-Marie, Celemencki, and Calixte 2014). For example, Toraif et al. (2021) demonstrate how their work with young participatory action researchers enabled a better conceptualization of antiracism and improved strategies for creating antiracist spaces. Their conclusions focus on ongoing dialogue and space to acknowledge positionalities and strategies that were also adopted in our work.

In parallel with the transfer of power from adult researchers to child participants, there is also a concerted effort to address epistemic injustices and challenge the authority of Western science in constructing knowledge about marginalized communities. Informed by decolonial and Indigenous studies as well as feminist research methodologies (Smith 2012; Rodríguez 2018), these approaches critique the imposition of "Western" ways of knowing and researching. As Smith (2012) warns, the assumption that research is inherently beneficial does not automatically position researchers to act in the best interests of the communities they study. Instead, co-produced research emerges as a response to the call for decolonizing methodologies, advocating for "respectful collaboration, dynamic storytelling, and reciprocity" across the research process (Stanton 2014, 573). Acknowledging the persistent (post)colonial structures within academia, where research has historically functioned as an extractive process (Rodríguez 2018), we recognize that it may be unrealistic to entirely escape this cycle. Nevertheless, we view participatory research with racialized children in this study as an initial attempt to disrupt conventional

structures of knowledge production, creating space for explicit engagement with issues of power, domination, and representation.

We are also mindful that power and voice are complex and often contested concepts in participatory research, and that participatory methods are not automatically "fool-proof" in terms of epistemological or ethical integrity (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). In considering these complexities, we draw on Bodén (2021), who explores ethics in research involving children by taking a detailed look at the prepositions used, i.e. research on, to, with, for, and by children. Bodén's argument that research by children, i.e. involving children as co-researchers, is not necessarily more ethical, queers the notion of levels of participatory research being defined as "good" or "bad," a dichotomous dilemma that also occupies Holmes and Ravetz (2024). In line with this and similar work (Pahl 2023), we therefore do not view the children in our research as the go-betweens between us and knowledge, but instead are working collaboratively with children to create a space where we can explore what it means to be a child in certain contexts. Our work was further informed by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor's (2015) work, which highlights six challenges and solutions regarding the work with children as co-researchers, including children's research competence, lack of training, insider/outsider perspectives, remuneration, power differentials, and issues around child protection. We return to these themes in various places throughout this paper and offer co-authorship as an additional concern relevant to the field of participatory research.

In embracing the uncertainties, openness, and "messy realities" inherent in participatory research, especially with racialized children and young people, we draw on Pillow's (2003, 188) concept of "reflexivities of discomfort," or, as she explains, an "uncomfortable reflexivity—a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous." Discussions about racism are not "comfortable" discussions; however, the "discomfort" within the context of this research is less about personal discomfort and more about the discomfort of inhabiting a tenuous space. Co-constructing knowledge with children is tenuous, as positionalities are explored, articulated, and made manifest through dialogue. Engaging in such dialogue, a curiosity to explore and a willingness to listen and learn therefore form the core collective positionality of the author team, qualities which are also highlighted in critical dialectical pluralism (CDP) (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013). CDP as a meta-paradigm transcends specific methods and methodologies, focusing instead on breaking down power structures and engaging in co-research from the outset, continually reflecting on positionalities and relationships at all points of decision-making (Forzani et al., 2021). Through our research, we offer "collective reflexivity" as a term which may help to embed CDP in participatory research with children and young people, with co-authoring as a meaningful pathway to bringing this framework to life.

A Note on Co-authorship

Since our paper does, among other things, seek to make a contribution to the field of participatory research by highlighting co-authorship with children and young people as a significantly important aspect of the research process, we feel that we

must make this process explicit and subject it to scrutiny, so that it may ultimately benefit the research community.

While collective writing is not new, collective writing with children and young people is a comparatively recent phenomenon, born largely from researchers' increasing problematization of participatory research principles and the notion of child agency (Little et al. 2024). In writing this paper, we negotiated how each individual wanted their voice to be heard, with different examples of academic co-authorship with children and young people available (Blackawton et al. 2011; Little et al. 2024; Little and Little 2022; Schaefer et al. 2021; Toraif et al. 2021; Tyson McCrea et al. 2024).

Co-authorship, however, in the instance of this paper, is not just an output of the research, but a form of collective, rigorous inquiry, made tangible through collective, relational writing (Lee et al. 2024). It is worth pointing out here that, for one author of this paper, this is the third foray into co-authorship with children, and in all instances, given the choice, the children opted to contribute to a paper that would focus on methodological considerations around participatory research and their role within it, rather than substantive data outputs from the research (Little, 2024; Little and Little, 2022). Of particular importance here is the notion of equity, rather than equality—being able to differentiate between co-authorship as equal contribution, which is rarely completely true even in adult-only writing partnerships, and foregrounding co-authorship as an equitable contribution, where everyone contributes according to their interest and level of understanding. Crucially, though, having different levels of understanding should not be understood as assuming children do not understand the complexities involved. *I think young people can grasp concepts to a much higher degree than might be expected. Perhaps combatting the perception that children of 11 cannot understand the dynamics of research settings is key here.*

In working with children from migration backgrounds directly, while navigating traditional academic spaces, we needed to find methods of co-authorship that would result in an equitable (rather than equal) division of labor. In pursuit of this, and within the context of our ongoing meetings as co-researchers on the project, we organized an additional meeting for a purposeful, recorded conversation, where we discussed themes to explore in the paper. This discussion was transcribed and formed the basis for this piece of work, with adult authors drawing together key themes and writing "around" the child authors' contributions, inserting academic references and contexts. The child authors' contributions are therefore not limited to their original voices (as expressed in italics throughout the paper) but also include the conceptualization of the paper, identifying suitable foci, and contextualizing the research literature. Throughout this process, we were aware of Bradbury-Jones and Taylor's (2015) counter-challenge to critics saying that children lack research competence, as we collaborated on a process that was equitable and drew on each contributor's strengths. *Different approaches may need to be taken depending on the age of the children involved. You would not expect a younger child to be able to articulate their experiences in the same way as an older child but they may still have valuable contributions.*

Before submission, the paper was shared with all co-authors, and changes were made as any author saw fit. Following the receipt of reviewers' comments, an additional

meeting took place where we collectively discussed these comments, and the child co-authors added additional content regarding the comments that focused specifically on their contribution. Other required changes (e.g. those focusing on structure or the need for additional literature) were undertaken by the adult co-researchers.

Ethics in Participatory Research and Co-Authorship

Throughout the project, we paid particular attention to the young co-researchers' sense of agency and ownership, while also being protective and ethical regarding how individual comments may be linked back to their authors, acknowledging that our positionalities will shape how we comment and write. Lundy (2018) writes about the weighing up of rights, specifically instances where a child's right to be heard may be outweighed by another, more pressing right. With ethics in academia being both a core principle and a procedural aspect of the research process, we share some of our joint considerations, to facilitate transparency and scrutiny, and to move forward related with epistemologies.

With the research project aiming to understand young people's views on growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage, the adult researchers were aware that a wide array of topics might end up being raised by children and young people involved (Little and Zhou, 2024). At the same time, with participatory research and co-production being core elements of the research design, the adult researchers wanted to pre-empt making assumptions about the shape of the final research project. For this reason, the project underwent three separate ethics approval processes—the first in relation to the recruitment of the young co-researchers and the work with them, and the second and third (following discussions and planning with young co-researchers) covering the global and local call for data collection respectively.

Ontologically, it is worth repeating that the young co-researchers were not expected to contribute "data"—their experiences, even if shared in discussions, would not be part of the final data pool (although those who were keen to have their experiences included were able to contribute to data collection as regular participants, involving additional information sheets and consent forms). Within the context of this project, their role was as co-researchers with lived experiences of the topic under investigation—arguably a type of insider research (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). The distinction was partially due to the adult researchers' recognition that identity research is inherently personal, and potentially emotionally charged (Little and Zhou, 2024), and that, for meaningful and reflective discussions to occur, it should be possible to contribute without a concern that these contributions would be captured as "data" along the way. Information sheets and consent forms highlighted this, and the need for a "safe space" during discussions, which was reiterated at meetings. Parental consent, as well as each child researcher's consent, was sought as part of the process. The ability to consent has been much debated in research involving children, due to their need to be protected, and we followed Bradbury-Jones and Taylor's (2015) recommendations to judge ability to consent on an individual basis, build in time for reflection and debriefing, recognize the role children have in supporting each other, as well as stressing that an adult must be in the same room as the child during online meetings, and having safeguarding policies in place (p. 165). Further, seeking

consent from both parent and child seemed, to us, the most ethical way to ensure that both the young co-researchers themselves, and their parents, would be aware of what the co-production element of the project might entail (Little et al, 2024). Other aspects of the information sheet were more logistic in nature, talking about time commitment, meetings being online or in person, etc.

Attempts to recruit the young co-researchers were made via social media and through a local Chinese heritage language school, in the end, all seven young co-researchers came from the heritage language school. This provided both advantages and disadvantages—on the one hand, most of the young co-researchers knew each other at least by sight, on the other, it presented a bias in the researcher team, towards children who attended complementary schooling to support heritage language development. Outside of this commonality, the seven co-researchers included the full age range (11–16 at the beginning of the research) and a gender mix (5 female, 2 male) and included children from a variety of heritage backgrounds, including mixed heritage.

Co-authoring this paper raised additional ethical complexities, regarding how adult and children's voices should be represented. The young co-researchers decided that their voice should be distinguishable from adult voices, but, since they are authors and co-researchers, rather than participants, that their words should be embedded within the overall text, presented in italics. As an author team, we were mindful that we are presenting a methodological paper that focuses on participatory research that includes an element of racism, rather than aiming to share the young co-researchers' experiences of racism themselves. Nevertheless, this raised issues of positionality and ethics, and *even though we're not actively sharing our experiences, they do obviously influence how we see things so they very much might impact, so for example suggesting something that [adults] might not have thought of because it's very specific to our experience.* Rather than attributing individual quotes, we therefore collectively chose the relative anonymity of presenting one coherent text that nevertheless represents five voices. These are visually distinguishable as belonging to the adults and young people co-authoring the paper, respectively. In acknowledging that not all young co-researchers will have identical interests and foci, we opened the co-authoring of this paper to all of our young co-researchers and made discussion of ethics and informed consent an ongoing process throughout the work.

At the same time, we understand that this model of writing offers an apparent homogeneity, and so, following the reviewers' recommendations, we offer brief biographical information (see Table 1) of all co-authors involved, to give brief glimpses of respective positionalities involved in the creation of this paper. These are entirely unedited, whereas the wider paper has been edited for spelling, as might be expected from any academic publication.

Racism, Anti-Asian Racism, and Childhood

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a surge of anti-Asian—specifically anti-Chinese—racism (see e.g. Cheah et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2023 for a small selection); however, it would be disingenuous to assume that, prior to the pandemic, children from Chinese heritage and migration backgrounds were unaffected by racism.

Historically, anti-Asian racism has been rendered notably invisible within broader racial discourses, often leaving individuals of Asian descent on the periphery of conversations about racism, equity, and marginalization (Lee et al. 2022; Sue, Sue, and Sue 2021). One of the reasons for this stems from the traditional binary perspective on race that tends to focus on Black and White dynamics (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Sue et al. 2007). The pervasive model minority discourse further obscures the existence of systemic anti-Asian sentiments, overshadowing the challenges and vulnerabilities that Asian children face in terms of racial discrimination and microaggressions (Chen, Chang, and Shih 2021; Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019). Working directly with young people, Lee et al. (2022) found that, while these children and young people engaged in racialized debates and discourses around Black Lives Matter, they were less aware of anti-Asian racism and their own roles as racialized ethnic minorities. Similarly, Fang et al. 's (2024) study also suggests that Asian youth frequently face anti-Asian racism that is prevalent but subtle, manifesting from an early age though it often remains unnoticed and unrecognized.

Racial socialization and learning about systemic oppression are essential for children and young people of color to develop their identity and navigate a racialized world, yet adult discomfort can often hinder these necessary conversations about race and racism (Wilton et al. 2024). Existing studies reveal that dialogue within homes and schools often fails to properly address anti-Asian racism (Hsieh and Kim 2020). For example, Asian youth in Fang et al. 's (2024) study shared that anti-Asian racism is framed as a taboo topic in Asian homes and internalized by the community itself. Compounded by factors such as acculturation stress, uncertainties of immigration status, traditional mental health beliefs, and intergenerational cultural conflict (Chou et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2023), these issues further muddle the discourse, contributing to a complex landscape where anti-Asian racism remains inadequately addressed.

Amid the complexities and reticence surrounding anti-Asian sentiment and its open discourse, participatory research might emerge as a critical tool for delving into and demystifying these complexities, offering a pathway to more meaningful engagement and solutions. Participatory research can help center the voices of people of color (Tyson McCrea et al. 2024); however, it can and does also expose young co-researchers, as well as participants, to more in-depth engagement regarding their own identities as racialized members of ethnic minority groups (Angod 2024), necessitating careful navigation and ongoing reflexivity as part of the research process, with emotional wellbeing as paramount. While our methodological paper does not delve into the specific racial challenges that children face, it seeks to show the value of research and co-research as a means to critically explore these nuanced and often contested realities.

Project Background

The project "Growing up Multilingual with Chinese Heritage" focuses on capturing the perceptions, ideas, experiences, hopes, and dreams of 11–18-year-old children and young people. Working with seven young co-researchers (aged 11–16 years old), of whom three chose to become co-authors of this paper, two adult researchers—one white, one Chinese—set out to understand how best to create a "safe space" where

children and young people felt they could use all their languages to express their identity.

The project encompassed two strands, both of which were co-constructed and co-conceptualized from the research base in Sheffield, UK, where all co-researchers reside. Sheffield is a city with strong industrial heritage in the north of England and has a vibrant Chinese community, as well as a heritage language school. The global strand encouraged young people growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage and migration background to submit any text or multimodal artifact of their choosing (i.e. texts, films, drawings, collages, etc.), expressing any aspects of their identity they wish to raise. The local strand brought together children and young people in focus groups according to age, with the questions co-designed with the young co-researchers. The adult co-researchers had, from the very beginning, encouraged the young co-researchers to think about what aspects of dissemination they would want to get involved in, including the possibility of co-authorship. Since the young co-researchers had identified race and racism as one of the research foci of the study, the adult co-researchers suggested this journal as a possible "home" for our collaboration. It is important to note that this does not mean that the adult co-researchers had not identified it as a possible focus, but simply that, through co-construction, all co-researchers had reflected on the topics that should form part of the research. In this context, adult co-researchers took an initial backseat to understand what topics young co-researchers identified as being important to their lived experience of growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage, and race, racism, and the experience of being racialized was raised by the young co-researchers as one of several topics that focus group questions should actively focus on. The topic was identified by all co-researchers as being more complex than others (e.g. the exploration of family language policy, i.e. who within the family speaks what language with whom—although this is a rich and complex research area in and of itself, see e.g. Curdt-Christiansen 2018). The call for papers allowed us to hold additional reflective meetings with the specific purpose of co-authorship, examining how the research had taken shape through co-construction, and how this was experienced by those involved. As a team, we decided that others may benefit from following our process of "collective reflexivity," which we present in this paper.

In the following, therefore, we jointly explore the advantages and disadvantages of co-constructing such work, and the affordances co-constructed research offers within this sphere. In doing so, our work makes an important contribution to the field of participatory research with children from racialized migration backgrounds, highlighting potentially new ways of navigating these complex research spaces.

The Role of Research and Researchers in Conversations about Racism

In our discussions for this paper, we reflected on the young co-researchers' suggestion that questions about racism should form part of our focus group agenda, and what constituted a "safe space" for this within the research context. Within the context of co-produced research with young people, this "safe space" actually encompassed two spaces—on the one hand the preparatory work with the young co-researchers, and, on the other, the setting of the actual research project, involving the actual participants.

Regarding the former, we were aware that our young co-researchers were aged between 11–16 years old, and so we sought to establish a collaborative and sensitive environment where differing views and perspectives were welcome, acknowledging that these obviously came from a variety of lived experiences and levels of maturity. In alignment with critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013), but also with Gadamer's (1989) Fusion of Horizons, which focuses on sensitive communication and collaboration to help individuals understand each other's viewpoints, our researcher meetings spent considerable time ensuring young co-researchers understood that they were not required, nor requested, to share personal experiences, but that support was nevertheless available if conversations touched on topics that felt uncomfortable. *I think that for us who put ourselves forward for this project, we already prepared for these questions, so we didn't feel uncomfortable. I think because we were working in a group when one person has an idea, other people build on it, and it creates a big chain, so it's not as intimidating to put forward your opinion. I think that the fact that it is entirely ok and even good that members of the group may not agree with each other has been clearly expressed. There has been a great effort to explore individualized circumstances and the differing perspectives that come with this.*

Regarding the latter, i.e. for the research project to constitute a "safe space" for participant children and young people to air their thoughts and experiences regarding racism, the young co-researchers helped to contextualize children's experiences on a day-to-day basis and explained to the adults how they may be positioned by young people within the research context. As such, they brought valuable experiences into the research team that would have been otherwise absent (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). While teaching about racism and "not being racist" occurred in schools, *I haven't had an awful lot of conversations about racism with adults [beyond school settings], but that might just be because we're not a very intergenerational society, and I am just surrounded by young people. But I have had a lot of conversations with people my age and from different backgrounds about racism, and I don't think I recall having a conversation with an adult that wasn't in sort of an educational context about racism.* On clarifying whether a research conversation would be classed as educational by default, *I think [participants] would count it outside of an educational context because it's not paired with a lesson or some sort of message. It's just freedom to express their opinions and experiences.* Including conversations about race and racism therefore may have an important role to play, by sitting outside curricular experiences and expectations, with adults who, although they may be in a different power relationship to young people, are not assessing them, nor do they have an ongoing relationship, which may help freedom of expression. *When you're outside the educational context, you're kind of more open in talking, so you're not really scared to express what you're actually feeling. So I feel like it's really important that we don't label it as educational to be able to get the people to talk more openly.* Nevertheless, ethical concerns were clear among all researchers. *When you want [participants] to elaborate more on [their experiences], we need to kind of be careful of the wording, so we don't force them to talk about something they don't want to.*

Aligning with critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013), our discussions and reflections therefore not only involved deciding on which questions

to ask and how to ask them, but also helped us, as a group of adult and child co-researchers, to reflect on power relationships inherent in research in general, and in our research project in particular.

Constructing and De-constructing Young Co-researchers as Experts of Their Lived Experiences

In our discussions, the adults explicitly situated themselves as learners, in order to help us understand each others' lived experiences. Within this context, we explored lived experiences, allyship, and potential generational differences. In discussing what working with young co-researchers added to the project, *I think maybe we have a different perspective and sort of adults contextualize things they've had more experiences and they've linked it to things they've read, so younger people have their experiences but isolated in a way. I think in some ways children or young people, especially when they're younger, are in very set environments that are well controlled by adults and school and that's where they interact, whereas it's very different for adults or people who are over the age of 14 because they go off and do things on their own.*

Similar to researchers of any age, young co-researchers bring their own positionalities into the research process. In our discussions, for example, diverse views emerged regarding the appropriate age for children to engage in conversations about race and racism. *As you go up in the year group, there'll be a progressive and growing awareness, but it also depends how you define racism, so would it count as sort of subtle nods and differences that are malicious but not in an obvious way or would it be very blatant racism and exclusion.* Differentiating experiences led us to a discussion about microaggressions, and *I don't really think that for the younger years, for example, 11 or 12, you shouldn't ask about microaggressions because they might not have picked up too much on this experience.* Although this expressed some concern that raising the topic of racism would mean children would engage in more detail with experiences they might have previously brushed off (Angod 2024), this view was not necessarily shared universally, and using conversations as an opportunity to give names to experiences was also voiced. *I think when you're young sometimes your norm is very much your own, and then, when you get older you sort of link it to the world around you and then you gain an awareness that maybe this isn't normal. So I think if you did ask it you'd have to be very clear about what you meant, and raise that distinction between microaggressions and more in your face racism.*

Ongoing reflections and discussions are highlighted as a vital component of research following the critical dialectical pluralism paradigm, helping to break down and question power imbalances between researchers and participants (Forzani et al., 2021). Through our work, however, we further found that collective reflexivity is also important to critically understand and question the concept of homogeneity in participatory research. This process enabled us to approach conflicting perspectives and dialogues about race and racism—which are inherently entangled—in a genuine manner, which will be explored further in the following section.

Reimaging Conversations about Racism through Collective Reflexivity

In creating this paper, we engaged more deeply with the language we each use to identify our roles and intentionally fostered collective reflexivity, wherein each researchers' positionality interacted with the others' and shaped the study.

It is important to mention that the discussions that took place in preparation for this paper were significantly more in-depth than the discussions that took place as part of the co-construction of the research itself. For the latter, we worked as a team to decide on focus group questions for local participants, by first considering the topics or general areas that should be explored. These general areas included, at the top level, language, culture, racism, everyday life, relationships, community, and political views. All these topics came originally from the young co-researchers and were then refined into questions or sub-areas of exploration. As we explored whether all topics would be appropriate—both for the various age groups and for the wider context, for example, allowing for the fact that a focus group may include young people from Hong Kong as well as mainland China, we flagged "political views" as the most difficult to discuss, and agreed to only further explore it with older groups, or in groups where it was first raised by participants. For the topic of racism, we discussed how to sensitively create space for a variety of experiences. Because of the COVID pandemic, several of the young co-researchers remembered anti-Asian racism (Cheah et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2023) in the media, and so awareness of racism on a wider scale was included as a topic for discussion, as well as personal experiences. The young co-researchers also suggested the inclusion of casual or "jovial racism" from friends, and both within our co-researcher environment and within the final focus groups, this led to reflexivities of discomfort (Pillow 2003), as young people subjected their friends' behavior to wider scrutiny from the group. Through our discussions, it became clear that young co-researchers had varying interpretations of racism, varying boundaries of what they themselves classed as racism, and varying vocabulary to discuss this. The term "micro-aggression," for example, was only familiar to the oldest of the young co-researchers, while "making fun of," "teasing," "joking" or "bullying" were terms all familiar with. By mutual agreement, these terms were adopted as a starting point to broach the topic of racism within the focus groups. Due to the research project's focus on language ("growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage"), raciolinguistic experiences were included, such as discrimination or bullying due to language or accent. Co-researchers were sensitive to how the shaping of questions would influence the research, since *when talking and discussing ideas or asking questions, you need to be really careful about wording, because you might lead things in a certain direction, narrowing children's ideas and that isn't what we want.*

At the same time, there was recognition that co-research and co-authorship would help with data analysis and dissemination, since *there needs to be some care taken in not misinterpreting the ideas of children or making assumptions about their ideas when something isn't conveyed clearly.* Neither the co-researchers, nor our participants, were a homogenous group (in fact, being homogenized was raised across the study as an important point of irritation and frustration, and so avoiding this was at the forefront of everybody's minds.

Co-researchers obviously occupy a dual space, both as researchers and as members of the target participants group, navigating the insider/outsider perspective Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) discuss. This sense of belonging and ownership became transparent in the changing use of pronouns, and all young co-researchers did, at one point or another, switch from "we/us" to "you" and vice versa, when talking about the research process. We believe that this change in pronouns, although small, is ultimately an important reminder of the duality inherent in the co-researchers' role—they are, after all, experts of their own lives (Pahl 2023, Little et al. 2024). Whereas, initially, the young co-researchers' role was framed as helping to create the research instruments, our collective reflexivity enabled us to question this role, and, specifically, to jointly explore boundaries around comfort and discomfort among young people in co-produced research. One aspect we discussed was who should conduct the focus groups in the first place, because *when young people talk to adults, it's in a structured environment and they're not always incredibly open about their experiences as they would if they were talking to someone of their own age group, even if they don't know them that well.* At the same time, however, we acknowledged the experience necessary to navigate complex conversations. We discussed the potentiality and affordances of co-facilitated focus groups, *that would be more casual and [young people] know they are able to express what they feel without being judged by someone older than them. Sometimes when you're talking to adults, you feel the need to put things a certain way and to convey your ideas in a certain manner. I think when you're talking to people of your own age group, there's less of a pressure to do that. And you might end up sharing things in a slightly different way.*

The adult co-researchers expressed concerns about the young co-researchers' wellbeing within the context of exposing them to the shared racialized experiences of other young people. Again, our collective reflexivity highlighted different experiences, identities, and approaches, ranging from *I think it might very much depend on the specific experience and might not be something that we can predict* to *I personally don't really feel strong emotions when other people are talking about racism.* Upon reflection, we decided that young co-researchers would not co-facilitate focus groups—partially due to the uncertainty of such a situation, partially because the age of participants (11–18 years old) extended beyond that of our co-researchers (11–16 years old). Further, due to availability and interest of co-researchers, we would not have been able to create an equitable experience, meaning some focus groups would have been co-facilitated, and others not. Instead of co-facilitation, however, our participatory reflexivity approach led us to recognize the differences among our young co-researchers, and, in turn, allowed us to shape our participant recruitment processes to *run through these things and makes the participants aware that they can choose not to answer questions and they can choose to opt out, and also teach them coping strategies* (Angod 2024). Within focus groups, we discussed how different participants felt about and reacted to their experiences, creating space for individuality, and problematizing, in particular, notions of "jovial racism" from friends highlighted above.

Conclusion

Participatory and co-constructed research with children is complex at all times—in contexts that involve potentially highly emotive and personal experiences, such as

marginalization and racism, the approach rightly requires careful scrutiny. Our paper makes a methodological contribution to the field of participatory research, offering critical dialectical pluralism as a theoretical lens, and co-authorship and collective reflexivity as practical lenses through which to develop and construct research around racism collaboratively with children and young people. We further offer "collective reflexivity"—open discussions that bring out positionalities, experiences, and views, as a helpful methodological construct in participatory research that embraces critical dialectical pluralism (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013). Specifically, we position "collective reflexivity" as conceptually and philosophically different from what might, outside the context of co-produced research, take the shape of a set of focus groups with a group of young people to shape the research questions, which then gets conducted with a wider participant body. Our approach deliberately seeks to disrupt and trouble the notion of children and young people's involvement in research, with academia typically and traditionally trained to position children as participants, rather than as agents, within research contexts. We understand that such a shift in the positioning of children invites welcome and necessary scrutiny, bearing in mind that the concern for the wellbeing of all involved needs to remain at the absolute ethical forefront of all research. We ask, however, that academia considers the agency of young people involved as co-researchers, and suggest that our model of collective reflexivity and co-authorship in co-produced research might be helpful in reframing researcher roles—adult and child alike— within the context of co-produced research. *We took part in discussion as opposed to simply being asked questions and answering questions. We asked our own questions and were able to steer the conversation in directions we were interested in. Whilst adults were providing information on the context of the discussion and providing material for discussion, our ideas felt just as significant.* Specifically, in our reflections about the methodological advantages of such research, *adults know what happens to children normally, but we understand what happens to children our age, and we know what kind of viewpoint we want to understand, we know what we want to learn from.* Therefore, co-produced research that embraces critical dialectical pluralism and collective reflexivity ensures that not only the way research is conducted is shaped by children and young people, but that the research agenda itself is multiply informed from adult and child positionalities and epistemologies. The approach therefore troubles the question "who is research for," and facilitates children to shape research agendas that concern them.

Through collective reflexivity, we are encouraged to continually engage in dialogue —including discomforting dialogue (Pillow 2003)—seeking to understand how positionalities of all co-researchers influence research methodologies and outcomes. Through collective reflexivity, we also empower young co-researchers by honoring their individual identities and positionalities, rather than merely viewing them as representatives or proxies for the target research group they are a part of. In returning to Bodén (2021), while research "with" children is not necessarily "better" than research "on" children, for certain purposes, especially in research around complex emotions and experiences linked to racism and identity, collective reflexivity strengthens the research approach, adding rigor through co-construction and facilitating our joint understanding in participatory research. To date, co-authorship with children has only been marginally explored as a practice in academic research.
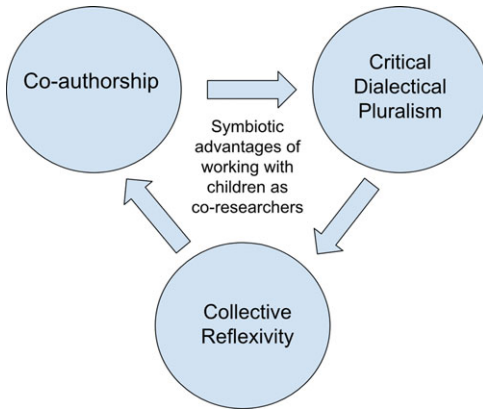
Figure 1. Symbiotic advantages of working with children as co-researchers.

We suggest that co-authorship—and the additional discussions that take place through this process—forms a vital component of participatory research, creating further spaces to include children in equitable ways in the research process. As such, we introduce critical dialectical pluralism, collective reflexivity, and co-authorship as a symbiotic relationship of philosophy and practice to further cement the agency of children and young people in research that concerns them (see Figure 1).

Within the context of racism and marginalization, working with young people as co-researchers, through to co-authorship and other dissemination, helped to shape the research at all stages—from the proposed methods through to the topics that would become the focus, through to the areas of interest within these topics, and finally how findings should be presented to a wider audience. In the context of our study, co-researchers (depending on interest and availability) co-presented the work during talks, co-authored this paper, and, together with other children from Chinese-speaking backgrounds, co-constructed a performance and film from the data (https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/events/growing-multilingual-chinese-heritage). Co-authorship is therefore not exclusively in relation to academic publication (although it has been a focus of this paper), but has wider implications for research in this sphere. We therefore present co-authorship with children as a meaningful, additional part of the puzzle of participatory research, especially for authors working within the framework of critical dialectical pluralism. In combination with critical dialectical pluralism and collective reflexivity as two complementary theoretical lenses, co-authorship offers a "practical home" to theory. Together, the symbiotic relationship of the three offers opportunities to trouble and disrupt our understanding of participatory research and offers a participatory, co-produced pathway forward within the field.

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