

What does it mean to employ young people as co-researchers?

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Across educational research, participatory, co-designed and youth-led methodological approaches have gained increasing prominence, with growing efforts to engage young people as collaborators in research that directly impacts their lives (Habib et al., 2024; Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Within these approaches, compensating young people for the time they give to research activities is recognised as ethically necessary (Afinich et al., 2020), most often through vouchers or symbolic payments. While these practices move away from extractive research models, they also raise less frequently examined questions about how labour, value and benefits are configured within the research process - questions that intersect with wider European debates regarding youth labour, where access to paid work remains uneven and tied to socio-economic disadvantage (ILO, 2024).

This paper addresses two related research questions: What happens when young people's participation in education research is organised through paid employment? And how do wages enter into knowledge production by reconfiguring research relations? Conceptually, our analysis draws on Gillen's (2019) *Power in the Room* to explore how paid work structures educational activities and outcomes. Through his analysis of the Baltimore Algebra Project, a youth-run cooperative in which mathematical learning is organised through paid work, Gillen treats wages as a structuring condition under racialised capitalism that reorganises educational work and gives material weight to young people's intellectual labour, particularly for those positioned precariously within racial capitalism (2019). In the context of education research, where funds are fiercely surveilled by university systems and structures, paying young people through waged labour raises questions about the nature of work, value and just rewards. Certainly, the payment of wages can be seen as ethically suspect because productive labour under racial capitalism is organised through the exploitation of the worker as they produce commodities that hold surplus value for those in power (the white capitalist). Yet this labour may also operate as a form of

collective inquiry that has use-value for young people and their communities (Williams, 2011). Thus, we offer an analysis of paid participation as a condition that intervenes in unequal conditions of participation and recognition, while bringing into view different logics of value within educational research.

The paper draws on the *Very Local Maths* project (<https://verylocalmaths.org.uk/>), conducted in collaboration with a community centre in Manchester. Inspired by the Funds of Knowledge approach (Moll et al., 1992), which foregrounds the cultural resources of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the project explored 'community mathematics', understood as mathematics emerging beyond formal schooling and connected to young people's lives and experiences. Seven young people (13-16) took part in the project, most of whom identified as Black, neurodivergent and struggling with their participation in formal schooling. Over six monthly workshops, they were employed as co-researchers and paid an hourly wage to participate in the research.

The analysis draws on video recordings and written artefacts produced during the workshops, focusing on two episodes from our fourth workshop, where payment shifted from a background condition to an explicit object of negotiation. In the first episode, co-researchers explored how their labour might be valued if the project ran next year, considering factors such as travel costs, changes in minimum wage, or the university's financial capacities. The second episode centres on a collective discussion about how young people were using their wages, drawing attention to how payment circulated within the group and shaped possibilities and relations within and around the project.

The paper contributes a situated reflection on wages as a research device and their effects within educational research, highlighting payment as more than a practical or ethical arrangement supporting participation. This reflection makes visible how economic arrangements enter into research practices, supporting a more reflexive engagement with the conditions of educational knowledge production.

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