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## Qualitative Methods and Respectful Praxis: Researching With Youth

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## Qualitative Methods and Respectful Praxis: Researching With Youth

### Abstract

In this article, we report on findings from a critical literature review of qualitative methods in youth-focused research. The articles reviewed cover an array of methods including those used traditionally in qualitative research and others more recently established. We identify methods that involve youth in general and youth marginalized and/or criminalized within institutional structures, more specifically. We explore the ethical implications of researching with youth, institutional and in situ, a theme that emerged in the literature reviewed. We highlight the tensions, challenges, and power issues arising in the context of research with youth. We close with arguments for methods that move youth from the sidelines of research to greater involvement in the research process, including youth contributing to the research design, data collection, and data analysis. We emphasize the need for researchers to engage an ethical research praxis that ultimately finds space in the research process for youth voices to emerge.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research Methods, Research with Youth, Marginalized Youth, Research Ethics, Power Issues in Research with Youth, Risk and Research with Youth, Youth as Co-Researchers

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## Qualitative Methods and Respectful Praxis: Researching With Youth

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### Introduction

A vast amount of educational research has focused on questions related to youth issues. Researchers, from multiple perspectives and across various disciplinary fields and global contexts, are conducting research involving youth participants. Historically such research was conducted **on** youth, frequently vulnerable youth marginalized within educational contexts who become subjects of research who had no input in the research process or findings produced (McAreevey & Das, 2013; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). In more recent years, researchers have been conducting qualitative research studies **with** youth, using participatory frameworks that encourage youth to engage in the research process in various ways (Jardine & James, 2012; Krueger, 2010; Kumsa, Chambon, Yan, & Maiter, 2015; MacDonald et al., 2011; Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006). Often, these researchers have as their ultimate goal to better the experiences and lives of the youth involved in the research, and other youth more generally (Victor et al., 2016; Walsh, Hewson, & Shier, 2008).

Methodologies relevant to youth research include: participatory research (MacDonald et al., 2011), action research (Cammaraota & Fine, 2008; Foster-Fishman & Law, 2010), community-based participatory research (Jardine & James, 2012; Vukic, Gregory, Martin-Misener, & Etowa, 2016; Walsh et al., 2008), and arts-based research (Conrad & Kendal, 2009; Victor et al., 2016). Such research is distanced from the historical paradigm of adult researchers doing research **on** youth and utilizes methods that move youth from the sidelines of research to greater involvement in the research process, including youth contributing to the research design and the collection and production of data. Qualitative methodologies and methods situated within an interpretivist paradigm are well-suited to research focused on understanding youths' lives and experiences.

In this paper, we report on findings from our critical literature review of qualitative methodologies and methods appropriate for use when the research involves youth participants. We began our review with the following broad research questions in mind: what qualitative methods are suitable for conducting respectful research with youth participants and how might we provide space in the research process for youth voices to emerge?

## **Background**

Our purpose for exploring methods used when researching with youth participants is connected to our current work designing a youth-focused research project that explores the experiences of youth travelling what has become known, in the United States and Canada, as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This pipeline metaphor reflects the trend that involves youth who are often marginalized in educational institutions who choose or are forced to leave schools and, as a result, become at risk of entering the juvenile and later, adult criminal justice system (Dancy, 2014; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

Susan’s interest in education and involvement with youth began with her work as a secondary teacher in public school classrooms. For her doctoral research, she conducted a critical ethnography in a school housed in a federal-provincial prison for women. A number of the participants in her study were young women (18-25) who had left junior and secondary schools without completing their education, as they were disillusioned with the education system. They travelled what is now understood as the school-to-prison pipeline. Although not her doctoral research focus, Susan began to consider how secondary schools and young women’s experiences in public school institutions contributed to their journeys that ended with incarceration in prison.

Leanne’s experience includes a study exploring youth experiences with “Safe School” disciplinary policies and the criminal justice system. Participants were predominantly Black male and female youth between the ages 16-22, had been suspended or expelled from school, and had at some point been stopped, questioned, and/or arrested by police. They were travelling or considered “at-risk” of travelling the pipeline from school to prison. The project used focus groups, interviews, hip-hop workshops, and peer co-facilitators to gain insight into youths’ school experiences, their encounters with police, and their complex perceptions of justice.

Although each of us has conducted interviews and focus group research with youth connected to other studies, we are interested in learning more about the world of methods relevant for youth participants. We embarked on the review discussed in this paper as a way to advance our methodological knowledge: to understand more fully how to design a qualitative study involving youth who are considered in danger of non-completion of secondary education and vulnerable to experiencing the criminal justice system. Our goal is to conduct a study in which we maintain a respectful and ethical research process along with producing credible and useful findings, useful to participants and/or youth more generally as well as to the research community. We expect this article will be helpful to other researchers who conduct research with youth participants.

## **Reviewing the Literature**

We conducted a critical analysis of peer-reviewed literature that crossed multiple geographical and disciplinary boundaries (e.g., education, social sciences, social work, and health). A critical perspective informs our research, as well as our questions related to methodology, method, and ethics. Such perspectives call into question institutional refrains of equal opportunity, democracy, fairness, meritocracy and colour-blindness by giving attention to the complex social and historical contexts shaping individuals’ lives. Critical theories

highlight how institutions, as sites of power, inform the ways in which individuals struggle to negotiate their positions within them (Hinchey, 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Portfilio & Malott, 2011). A critical theoretical perspective enhances our understanding of methods employed in youth research and helps us address limitations within the field. Such a perspective makes visible the tensions, challenges, and power relations that inform research processes with youth and that circulate through all levels of research from inception, design, analysis, and representations of data. We suggest that these tensions and complexities must be taken into account in all research, particularly research with vulnerable individuals such as marginalized youth. In Canadian school systems, students experiencing high degrees of marginalization include racialized and Aboriginal youth who suffer discrimination, exclusion, and disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion (James, 2007; McMurtry, 2009).

Useful for our exploration of the educational experiences and life trajectories of youth at risk, incarcerated youth, and those travelling the school to prison pipeline are critical youth perspectives. Critical youth perspectives, such as critical youth studies (CYS), insist that researchers must “capture the mosaic of experiences and textured realities of young people’s lives” as opposed to representing them as having static lives and distorted behaviours (Ginwright, 2008, p. 14). Such perspectives refuse to essentialize youth experiences in ways that situate youth as problems to be managed or position youth simply as resistant beings. Rather, critical youth approaches encourage researchers to acknowledge the ways in which youth might engage in “transformational resistance” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 4). This includes involving youth as “partners in struggle” and as “resource[s] to be drawn upon in common cause” (p. vii).

### **Search Strategy and Choice of Literature**

Our search strategy involved accessing peer-reviewed scholarly articles published in English beginning with the year 2000. A vast amount of literature addressing youth and youth research is available from that time period. We compiled a preliminary list which included articles addressing youth broadly, and research with marginalized youth in particular, from a critical perspective. For this paper, we narrowed our selection to 30 articles that focused on research methods appropriate for youth, particularly vulnerable or “at-risk” youth, and youth involvement in research design and implementation. In our review of the articles we paid attention to and documented the researchers’ critical perspectives and theoretical frameworks, disciplines (e.g., education, social work), geographical contexts, methodology, choices of qualitative methods, as well as the authors’ discussions of the benefits and complexities involved when engaging in research with youth. There is not a single or consistent interpretation of what constitutes “youth” in the literature we reviewed and articles explored a range of ages. Overall, the articles focused on research with youth ranging between the ages 8-19. We also included some relevant articles that focused on research conducted with youth in their early 20s. Although not a conclusive capturing of literature on methods for working with youth, this paper demonstrates the specificity of working with youth and the need for researchers to pay attention to the unique needs of youth, as well as the role of researchers in ensuring we engage with youth to inform decisions on design and the research process. In what follows, we explore what was reported in the literature reviewed regarding research methods used with youth, especially research where youth are participants in the research process. We also consider some of the interconnected ethical issues that can arise when researchers work with vulnerable and marginalized youth as participants.

## Research Methods Used with Youth

Our review of the literature revealed a wide variety of methods suitable for research with youth. For ease of discussion, we organized these methods into the following broad thematic categories: (a) traditional methods; (b) visual and digital methods; (c) methods where youth construct data; (d) action-oriented methods; and (e) task-based methods. The methods included within these categories can be used alone or in combination with other methods. Multiple methods are considered important for adult participants as well as for youth. However, our purpose is to focus specifically on their relevance for research with youth. In all, the methods represent a range of approaches researchers utilized in their efforts to better understand youth contexts, experiences, needs, and identities.

Table 1. Youth Research Methods

Method	Examples	Authors
Traditional Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups (led by researcher, youth co-facilitated)</li> <li>• Interviews (Semi-structured and convergent)</li> <li>• Questionnaires (paper-based, interactive, assisted)</li> <li>• Oral history</li> <li>• Observations (classroom and home visits)</li> </ul>	Daley, 2015 Garakani, 2014 Holt and Pamment, 2011 Kral, Burkhardt, and Kidd, 2002 Leeson, 2014 MacDonald et al., 2011 Meloni, Vanthuyne, and Rousseau, 2015 Parr, 2010 Swartz, 2011 Vukic et al., 2016
Visual & Digital Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photovoice</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Text-to-speech technology</li> <li>• Place mapping (Cognitive maps; surveillance maps)</li> <li>• Visual (video) narratives</li> <li>• Digital stories</li> <li>• Ipads</li> <li>• Visual elicitation methods (combining moving &amp; still images)</li> </ul>	Foster-Fishman and Law, 2010 Garakani, 2014 Jardine and James, 2012 Kennelly, 2017 Krueger, 2010 Liebenberg, Ungar, and Theron, 2014 Parr, 2010 Power, Moss, and Dupré, 2014 Ruiz-Casares and Thompson, 2016 Victor et al., 2016 Vukic et al., 2016
Methods where Youth Construct Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversations facilitated by youth</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> <li>• Narrative methods (using memory books and diaries)</li> <li>• Photovoice</li> <li>• Documentaries</li> <li>• Portraiture</li> </ul>	Jardine and James, 2012 Krueger-Henney, 2013 Kumsa et al., 2015 Robinson, 2015 Swartz, 2011 Vukic et al., 2016

Action-oriented methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobile/spatial methods (e.g., guided walks through everyday locales)</li> <li>• “Creative” methods</li> <li>• Skits and drama</li> <li>• Small group activities</li> <li>• Games and activities books, drawing</li> </ul>	Griffin, Lahman, and Opitz, 2016 Kennelly, 2017 Kumsa et al., 2015 Leeson, 2014 MacDonald et al., 2011 Ritenburg et al., 2014 Robinson, 2015 Victor et al., 2016
Task-based methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawings</li> <li>• Diagrams (activity tables and “spider diagrams”)</li> <li>• Worksheets</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Participatory rural appraisal techniques</li> <li>• Diaries</li> </ul>	Garakani, 2014 Krueger, 2010 Leeson, 2014 Punch, 2002

**Traditional qualitative methods** are among the more recognizable forms of qualitative investigation. In the context of youth research, they come in various forms, although the most common include interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and observation. Usually at the centre of research using traditional methods is the researcher who designs the study, sets the research focus and generates the questions. Although many of the studies we explored incorporated some form of traditional method in their work with youth, these methods often were applied in combination with other more current methods. For example, “convergent” interviews might be used to allow youth to have more control in the flow, content, and direction of the interview (Leeson, 2014). A convergent interview “deliberately begins in an open-ended way in order to maximise the extent to which the data can be generated by the respondent’s experience and not led by the researcher’s questions” (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough, & Moore, 2004, p. 85). This widely used method “allows for spontaneity, flexibility, and a responsive approach from the interviewer” (Leeson, 2014, p. 209). Also, questionnaires can take on more interactive forms than those used conventionally by allowing youth to use technology to anonymously present their views on various topics (Garakani, 2014). Similarly, researcher-assisted questionnaires create opportunities for researchers to discuss youths’ answers verbally while youth are completing the questionnaires (Holt & Pamment, 2011). The benefits of these modified traditional approaches include a potentially more meaningful and engaging research experience for youth.

Although traditional methods are a valuable qualitative approach in youth research, some authors noted that when used in isolation, traditional methods may not capture the complexity of youth actions and experiences (Kim, 2016; Liebenberg et al., 2014; Robinson, 2015). For example, Robinson (2015) observed that because many youths may be accustomed to sharing their life stories with youth justice workers and other professionals, they may offer researchers “well-rehearsed” comments, may seek to give the “right” answers to direct interview questions, or may just be uncomfortable in interview settings (Robinson, 2015, p. 72). Researchers working with marginalized youth increasingly highlight how they must negotiate the tenuous relationship youth may already have with the research process. For example, in some under-served and over-researched communities, “the very mention of research turns off youth”, especially when “research has been used in these communities to regulate youth and decenter their knowledge” (Kumsa et al., 2015, p. 429). As Kim (2016) asserts, our methods must take into account who the youth are and consider how to engage youth in ways that directly benefit them and attend to their well-being.

**Visual and digital methods** have increasingly been adopted by researchers to enhance research with youth. Digital methods can take many forms, but generally digital and online technologies are used to collect and/or analyse research data (e.g., photovoice, film, video, blogging, ipads, and digital storytelling). Visual methods, which may overlap with many digital methods, generally rely on a range of artistic mediums to understand the lifeworlds of participants. Common examples include photography, drawings, paintings, and video (Garakani, 2014; Krueger, 2010; Parr, 2010). Photo-elicitation and film-elicitation methods (which may combine still or moving images) prioritize the participants' roles in shaping the research (Liebenberg et al., 2014). Participatory visual methods (e.g., photographing spaces and observing contexts) can help youth "think about their experiences and context in more detail prior to interviews" (Liebenberg et al., 2014, p. 533). Participatory visual methods like photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994), allow participants to engage more deeply in the research process as they take photos and analyse them alone or in groups. Kennelly (2017, p. 316) observed that where written transcripts from interviews are never included in researchers' final written work, photo journals or photos taken by youth are useful because they "can be shown in [their] entirety, capturing the temporal present moment as represented by that young person from their own spatial position." Moreover, visual methods may create opportunities to generate new knowledge and access youths' different memories of their experiences (Power et al., 2014). Visual and digital methods have also been particularly useful for easing communication across language, education, and ability and are therefore especially powerful when working with marginalized and disenfranchised youth (Jardine & James, 2012; Krueger, 2010; Liebenberg et al., 2014).

Overall, visual and digital methods may be used in combination with traditional research methods to "tap into" youth's interests and "make research fun" (Punch, 2002, p. 327). Although visual and digital methods have proven effective in research seeking to engage youth, limitations exist. Punch (2002) cautioned against assuming that youth always prefer or are more skilled with interactive visual or digital methods and argued that research with youth requires multiple approaches. Other literature reported that when using visual methods researchers needed to allow for additional time to conduct the research, which may not always be possible if they have limited access to youth in schools or detention centres. For example, students often need time to familiarize themselves with the method, take photographs, create paintings/pictures, or create visual products. Jardine and James (2012) found that in time-sensitive research contexts, youth in their study would often rush and take pictures that were "convenient" (p. 7). To address this limitation, the authors recommend a more thorough discussion and orientation to photography when working with youth. Other limitations include when photos or images are tied to particular seasons in which they were taken or may overemphasize specific events (Punch, 2002). In some contexts, visual and digital methods may generate resentment or bad feeling between youth who have access to expensive equipment (e.g., digital and video cameras) and those who do not (Jardine & James, 2012; Punch, 2002). Despite these limitations, researchers frequently draw on visual and digital methods seeing them as useful tools to engage youth as participants in the research process (Holt & Pamment, 2011; Krueger, 2010; Liebenberg et al., 2014; Victor et al., 2016). Multimodal visual methods can do more than simply enhance youths' engagement in the research; they can support researchers and participants in their critical examination of the context of youths' lives and experiences (Liebenberg et al., 2014).

**Youth constructing data.** Another youth research method invites youth to participate in the construction of data. For example, researchers may ask youth to create various written data such as memory books or diaries as well as visual data, including photo-journals, illustrations or "cognitive maps" of their schools and broader environments, reflections on their experiences with security and their perceptions of safety (Jardine & James, 2012; Kennelly,

2017; Krueger, 2010). Similarly, the method of portraiture allows youth the opportunity to contextualize research as they create and insert narratives and summaries of their lived experiences, circumstances, and actions which help researchers develop a more rounded and complex understanding of the ideological structures shaping the youth participants' lives (Krueger-Henney, 2013). Certainly, these methods are capable of generating rich sources of data on a range of topics. They may be particularly useful for providing detailed snapshots of vulnerable youths' lifeworlds, showing how youth negotiate authority, surveillance, and inequitable power structures that might contribute to their marginalization and/or criminalization (Krueger, 2010). For example, Krueger (2010) explained that by using place-mapping (or "surveillance maps"), youth created drawings that represented how they understood and experienced school safety. In doing so, they were able to add a "lived character of securitized space" (2010, p. 390). This method also allowed the youth and researchers to "shift away from a dominant discourse that has focused on how student disruptive behavior is representative of the neighborhoods in which they reside to explain the need for intensified school safety and security practices in schools" (2010, p. 390). One benefit of methods that encourage youth to construct data, as Swartz (2011) suggests, is that when youth control knowledge about themselves (and when researchers' methods honour youths' ways of knowing) power relations between researcher and youth are challenged (Swartz, 2011). Although potentially powerful methods for engaging youth, researchers need to be mindful of how or whether methods actually challenge or change the power that is always circulating in the research context (Tilley, 2016).

**Action oriented methods** engage youth in ways that involve their participation in some form of "action" (such as walking and talking about their surroundings, drama activities, small group activities or games). These methods are meant to engage youth in activities that allow researchers to learn more about their lifeworlds than they might through traditional methods. However, like visual methods, one central aim of action-oriented methods, particularly mobile or "spatial" methods, is youth empowerment. Through these methods, youth are able to take more control of the research process and research products. These methods are easily adaptable to participants' contexts and needs, which is particularly useful when researchers are working with marginalized and excluded populations (Deacon, 2000). For example, Daley (2015) notes the need for added flexibility when working with homeless and other hard-to-reach youth. Mobile methods can provide some flexibility and unique insight into the experiences of youth on various margins of society.

Although useful, some mobile or spatial methods (such as walking interviews) can "exist only in the moment they are undertaken" (Kennelly, 2017, p. 315). In this case, spatial methods can provide a sense of "who" participants are in relation to their environments but are more effective when combined with other methods (such as video and audio recording) that endure beyond the moment. Other challenges involved in action oriented research include researchers having limited access to youth in school environments and other more strictly regulated institutions (Tilley, Killins, & Van Oosten, 2005; Tilley, Powick-Kumar, & Ratkovic, 2009). For example, in contexts where youth might be in detention centres or in criminal justice settings, their movements, and possible participation in research, may be more tightly restricted (Robinson, 2015).

**Task-based methods** are often employed in attempts to encourage children and youth to "display their competencies" rather than patronizing youth with special "child-friendly" techniques (Punch, 2002, p. 330). Researchers need to be careful not to underestimate the capabilities of youth participants and, as a result, limit the richness of data collected by focusing too heavily on participants' age rather than their capabilities. When not solely focused on age, researchers often combine traditional "adult" research methods with those seen as more suitable for youth. Researchers using task-based methods often recognize that because children

and youth generally have limited experience engaging and talking with unknown adults one-on-one, more innovative approaches may help them be more comfortable in research contexts. By having youth participants work on tasks such as worksheets, drawings, diagrams and diaries, they are provided more time to think about their observations and experiences and may have more fun in the process—all of which can facilitate deeper engagement in the research and create opportunities for different questions and experiences to emerge (Krueger, 2010; Punch, 2002).

Like visual approaches, task-based youth methods require time, may need to accommodate students' schedules (if in school), and must account for the possibility that the tasks the youth complete may stray from the original intention behind the study (Jardine & James, 2012). As indicated earlier, researchers must also seek young people's interpretations and analysis of the data to ensure the adult's worldview is not an overpowering interpretive, analytic lens that silences the youth. However, youth involvement in this process requires time and effort. Diaries and other methods that require writing depend on youth's levels of literacy (Schelbe et al., 2015). In other situations, families may view the tasks we ask youth to complete as taking youth away from other tasks they are expected to complete at home (Punch, 2002). Although such methods are useful and may be appropriate for many youths, some of the literature we reviewed cautions that we should not assume that "youth friendly" tasks we ask youth to complete are "natural" or "simple" for all young people to complete (Garakani, 2014; Punch, 2002). For example, while conducting research with youth in Bolivia, Punch (2002) noted how lack of drawing ability, combined with minimal exposure to visual imagery, popular culture, and other media outlets (e.g., television and magazines) placed limitations on the types of images the youth could draw. Also, without regular opportunities for dialogue with participants, it was difficult for researchers to interpret and understand the meanings youth attributed to the products they created through these tasks.

In summary, researchers in the critical youth-focused literature reviewed often utilized traditional methods in their work with youth (for example, semi-structured interviews, observation, and focus groups) while recognizing that traditional methods alone (or any single qualitative method, for that matter) may not capture the complex processes involved in youth's decisions, actions, and experiences. Rather than search for an "ideal" method for working with youth, researchers need to draw on multiple methods to gain comprehensive insight into youths' environments (Liebenberg et al., 2014; Punch, 2002; Swartz, 2011). Ultimately, the literature we reviewed is clear that how one chooses a method to research youth depends on many intersecting factors. As Holt and Pamment (2011, p. 126) explain, "Choice of method cannot be determined by some abstract notion of its 'advantages and disadvantages' since particular methods (e.g., interviews and questionnaires) cannot be considered independently of their research setting." Nor are mere age or stage of life of participants the only factors researchers must consider as they design their research. Methods themselves are socially constructed and need to be informed by the research context, cultural and social environment, group differences (e.g., race, ability, ethnicity and gender), and physical and geographical setting. Conducting ethical and respectful research with youth requires more than selecting youth methods "off the shelf" (Holt & Pamment, 2011, p. 126). As researchers, we strive to, as Punch advocates, "strike a balance between not patronizing [youth] and recognizing their competencies, while maintaining their enjoyment of being involved with the research and facilitating their ability to communicate their view of the world" (Punch, 2002, p. 337).

### **Emergent Theme: Ethics and Research Involving Youth**

The literature we reviewed was focused on the methodological complexities of researching with youth, which unsurprisingly (when considering the critical theoretical lens

applied to the discussions), also incorporated an emphasis, sometimes in more detail than others, on the ethical implications of the qualitative youth-focused research. Some articles had a main emphasis on ethics (Constand, Tanel, & Ryan, 2015; Loutzenheiser, 2007; Robinson, 2015; Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2016; Schelbe et al., 2015; Swartz, 2011) while others addressed research ethics as one element in a broader discussion of research conducted with youth (Daley, 2015; Garakani, 2014; Jardine & James, 2012; Kim, 2016; Vukic et al., 2016). Researchers addressed the complexities of engaging in ethical research praxis along a continuum from the initial stages of gaining institutional clearance to involve youth in research to an exploration of the ethical dilemmas arising as the research proceeded. We include Table 2 below to give a quick summary of the various ethical issues given consideration in the literature we reviewed.

Table 2. Ethical Issues in Research Involving Children and Youth

	<b>Issues that lead to ethical quandaries</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Institutional ethics review process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- incompatibilities with qualitative, interpretivist research and judged inappropriately</li> <li>-committee members assess research proposed from limited methodological perspectives</li> <li>-inaccurate judgement of degree of risk</li> <li>- stereotypical notions of vulnerability</li> </ul>	Constand et al., 2015 Daley, 2015 Tilley et al., 2009
Youth cognitive development-ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-exclusion of youth based on inaccurate assessment of cognitive abilities</li> <li>- choice of methods incongruent with participant abilities</li> <li>-research design based on stereotypes of youth</li> </ul>	Christensen and Prout, 2002 Daley, 2015 Leeson, 2014 Punch, 2002 Robinson, 2015
Informed Consent and Assent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-youth capacity to understand what participation involves is misjudged</li> <li>-parental consent interferes with youth rights to participate</li> <li>-institutional consent from schools is withheld because research is focused on a sensitive issue</li> </ul>	Constand et al., 2015 Daley, 2015 Garakani, 2014 Jardine and James, 2012 Robinson, 2015 Ruiz-Casares and Thompson, 2016 Schelbe et al., 2015 Tilley et al., 2009
Vulnerability of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-minors by law</li> <li>-youth institutionalized while vulnerable have a right to participate in research</li> <li>-degree of understanding of youth is misjudged because they are thought to be vulnerable</li> <li>-voluntary participation may not actually be voluntary if the process influences youths' ability to decline</li> </ul>	Daley, 2015 Leeson, 2014 Parr, 2010 Swartz, 2011
Degree of Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-underestimated risk</li> <li>-exaggerated risk</li> <li>-unknown risk</li> <li>-researcher lack of contextual/historical/institutional knowledge to make sound judgements related to risk</li> </ul>	Daley, 2015 Loutzenheiser, 2007 Tilley et al., 2009

Sensitive Issues	-avoidance of areas deemed sensitive when there is a need to conduct research -schools say no to research that relates to youth culture and lives	Loutzenheiser, 2007 Tilley et al., 2005 Vukic et al., 2016
Power Issues	-power imbalances between researchers and participants -design of research on youth; lack of voice -adult-centred data analysis and decisions representing the youth participants	Fielding, 2004 Griffin et al., 2016 Kumsa et al., 2015 Leeson, 2014 Liebenberg et al., 2014 Loutzenheiser, 2007 Meloni et al., 2015 Robinson, 2015 Starkey, Akar, and Jerome, 2014 Swartz, 2011
Participant Voice	-marginalized within the research process -silenced in the findings -misrepresented in the research	Fielding, 2004 Jardine and James, 2012 Kral, Burkhardt, and Kidd, 2002 Kumsa et al., 2015 Liebenberg et al., 2014 Loutzenheiser, 2007 Parr, 2010 Swartz, 2011 Vukic et al., 2016
Choice of Method	-match with youth development and abilities -patronizing child-friendly methods -cultural mismatch between researcher and participants	Griffin et al., 2016 Jardine and James, 2012 Krueger, 2010 Kumsa et al., 2015 Punch, 2002
Reciprocity-Benefit	-giving back to participants -researchers versus participants -findings translated into action	Kral, Burkhardt, and Kidd, 2002 Swartz, 2011
Researcher positioning	-outsider/insider -differences-culture, class, race	Loutzenheiser, 2007 Meloni et al., 2015 Starkey et al., 2014
Cultural and class differences	-analysis & representation -credibility -power differentials & issues	Garakani, 2014 Krueger, 2010 Punch, 2002 Swartz, 2011

In what follows we discuss, within limited space, the ethical implications of youth research as raised in the literature. First, we address ethics from an institutional perspective using consent, an area of concern addressed in the literature, as an illustration. Second, we highlight examples of ethical issues related to research-in-process highlighting issues related to power.

## **Institutional Oversight**

In the articles, authors referred to the requirements of university institutional research review boards (e.g., Research Ethics Boards (REBs) Canada, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) United States, Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) Australia), and other institutions, such as hospitals and school boards, as well as Indigenous communities. They discussed the challenges of the ethics review processes they were subject to in order to gain clearance to involve youth in their research (Constand et al., 2014; Daley, 2015; Garakani, 2014).

In the Canadian context, for a number of decades, qualitative researchers working in university faculties have challenged REB policies and procedures and the research review process. Their critique emphasized the inappropriateness of institutional policies and procedures, developed under the influence of a bio-medical positivist model, being applied to qualitative, interpretivist designs (Haggerty, 2004; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Tilley, 2008; van den Hoonaard, 2002). Over time, researchers across Canada have contributed to comprehensive changes in the policy and procedures guiding the review of qualitative research and that continue to affect their abilities to conduct their research in appropriate ways (SSHWC, 2004).

In the literature reviewed, researchers discussed the challenges of a standardized institutional review for qualitative, interpretive research designs. Questions were raised as to review board members' level of methodological expertise and their abilities to appropriately review qualitative research with youth participants involved (Daley, 2015; McAreavey & Das, 2013). Specifically, researchers discussed the complexities of gaining informed consent to conduct research with their youth participants, especially in the case of those youth classified as minors (Garakani, 2014; Parr, 2010; Schelbe et al., 2015).

When youth are involved as research participants in applications submitted to the REB, REB members reviewing the applications pay close attention to the informed consent process. The focus deepens when participants are below the age of consent or are considered vulnerable (Tilley et al., 2009). Researchers are required to ensure that the appropriate permissions are in place, that parents and guardians have given consent, and that the youth assent.

Daley (2015) questioned institutional review committees' application of the criterion of degree of risk arguing that while risk level is a reasonable criterion, review committee members can exaggerate risk when an overly prescriptive review process is applied (see also McAreavey & Das, 2013). Youth may have a greater capacity to understand the implications of agreeing to participate in research than judged by institutional board members who view them as vulnerable (Daley, 2015; Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2016). A fine line exists between protecting youth participants and patronizing them. Protection is important, but the risk of involving youth can be exaggerated in the review process when reviewers' hold stereotypical notions of vulnerability and risk in relation to youth. This framing of youth as "in need of protection" can influence, to a greater degree than it should, REB members' review of the research proposed (Tilley et al., 2009).

Although parental consent is mandatory for youth who are minors, by law and under the age of consent, occasions arise when parental consent can interfere with youth rights to participate. Legal age of consent varies across research contexts. In Canada, youth under the age of 18 must have parental or guardian consent. Applying a mandatory age of consent is not as straightforward a process as implied in institutional ethics review processes. In some cases, youth may have the maturity and experience to decide on their own if it is in their best interests to participate. At times, the youth themselves can influence their parents' or guardians' decisions.

While securing guardian consent, an interesting situation arose, which attested to a child's sense of agency and competence. One set of guardians out of 27 declined participation on their daughter's behalf. She did not agree with their decision, returned home, explained in great detail the purpose and process of the inquiry, and subsequently persuaded her parents that she should participate. Clearly, she did not feel compromised by the inquiry and wanted her voice to be heard along with the others; a signed consent was returned the next day. (Parr, 2010, p. 456)

When the focus of the research is intricately tied to youth identity, youth may want to have their voices heard, but remain silenced if they are not permitted to participate because they are unable or do not want to ask for parental permission. Schelbe et al. (2015, p. 514) write of the researchers' experiences related to LGBTQ youth, consent, and participation.

A pressing barrier to gaining information on this population [LGBTQ youth] is the inability to reach vast numbers who are not "out" to family or community, because of factors leading many to keep their sexual and gender minority identities secret, such as family belief systems, regional political climate, and repercussions of coming-out to family, community, and peers.

Schelbe et al. (2015) explain that in some contexts "regulation requirements for parent/guardian consent lead to systematic exclusion of LGBTQ youth, thereby further obscuring and marginalizing their lives" (p. 514). They argue there are occasions when parental consent should be waived because garnering consent "may result in harm of the child or infringe on their rights to privacy or unjust exclusion" (2015, p. 515). They suggest that in some contexts "youth research advocates" (such as licensed social workers) rather than parents/guardians may contribute to the consent process and afford "an essential safety-net for youth participants" (p. 515). Regardless of who provides consent, if adults disagree with the research focus (e.g., condom accessibility, sexuality, and drug use) and the benefits of participation are not clear to them, youth may be denied the possibility to participate in the research (Kim, 2016; Suleiman, et al., 2006).

The culture/community in which youth live may also affect the process of acquiring consent. Jardine and James (2012) explore challenges they faced obtaining consent among Aboriginal communities, noting that, "Determining who is responsible for granting consent for minors is also difficult in communities where current guardianship is often not formally recognized" (2012, p. 7). Further, seeking consent may contradict and disrespect Aboriginal understandings and approaches to research activities (Garakani, 2014; Jardine & James, 2012). Chapter one of *The Cross-Cultural Survey Guidelines* emphasizes that "we cannot assume that 'one size fits all'" when considering consent (de Jong, Hibben, & Pennell, 2016, p. 816). For example, in a region in Guatemala, a local priest had the authority to deny the approval of research in the community (de Jong et al., 2016, p. 816). In other countries, such as Mali, participants have resisted providing written consent because they understood that "their word should be sufficient" (de Jong et al., 2016, p. 816).

Consent can be given initially, but this does not mean participants will follow through and participate when the research begins or continue to participate through the life of the study. Garakani (2014) discusses obtaining consent in her research involving Inuit youth. They explain how in seeking consent, their research team also needed to build trust and use language familiar to Inuit youth (such as sharing, respect, cooperation and humour) so youth would not disengage with the research after researchers obtained consent for them to participate. Ultimately, they chose to obtain consent verbally (audio-recorded) after many youths became

suspicious, disengaged, and walked out when presented with written forms. However one approaches consent, we recognize, as do several authors and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014), that consent is something we must consider as ongoing and in need of being renewed throughout the research process (Garakani, 2014; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Robinson, 2015; Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2010).

In our case, we will seek access to youth, both school-aged and beyond, crossing secondary school and juvenile detention centre contexts. The literature addressed expresses concerns that institutional consent from school boards and school contexts may be withheld because research is focused on a sensitive issue (Kim, 2016; Schelbe et al., 2015; Suleiman et al., 2006; Tilley et al., 2009). Another hurdle for us will be accessing youth incarcerated in youth detention centres but who still have a right to participate in research and may have the capacity to do so. In such contexts, our ability to capture youths' stories and engage them ethically in the research process "may well be thwarted by institutional dynamics" (Robinson, 2015, p. 69). Robinson explains that "in criminal justice settings where staff are accustomed to directing young people to activities . . . young people's agency (and ability to express their views) is tightly bounded" (Robinson, 2015, p. 69).

Researchers and institutions together need to continue to address the question of who must consent before youth can participate in research. The impossibility of a standardized response to the question is reflected in the literature we examined. Individual youth, contexts, research foci, and researchers matter in the formulation of a response to the question. Finding ways to ensure that youth are able to participate in research is the responsibility of those who have oversight of research, and for researchers themselves, especially those who want to work with youth to understand their experiences and contribute to positive change that matters to the youth participants and others. As Daley (2015, p. 13) reminds the research community:

The exclusion of people from research, in the name of "protecting" them, prevents research from being able to give voice to oppressed groups, and thus limits opportunities to advocate for change in these people's circumstances. Parts of a population can become invisible because they are either so tightly protected or too inconvenient to access.

### **Ethical Considerations in Situ**

The literature reviewed also introduced the question of ethics through a consideration of the ethical complexities emerging as the research process unfolded over time—ethics "in situ." While attempting to adhere to institutional criteria for ethical research, the researchers were faced with issues they had not addressed at the design stage or at the time of applying for ethical clearance (Garakani, 2014; Kumsa et al., 2015; McAreavey & Das, 2013).

Ethical issues intersect making it difficult to tease out one specific element. However, power was a theme often emphasized, in various ways, in the literature. Describing the power imbalance present in their research context, Schelbe et al. (2015) note that the relationship between youth and researchers may be determined by factors outside of the immediate research space. They explain that youth may bring:

. . . previous negative experiences with adults in authority into the research situation, voicing suspicion of procedures like note-taking and audio-recording. If a child closely associates the researcher with an institution supporting the study, her or his perception of the researcher's power (and by extension, their

own lack of choice and agency) could be magnified further. (Schelbe et al., 2015, p. 510)

Youth, who are often in more vulnerable and unequal positions in research, may tailor their answers to what they think adults wish to hear or may be wary of negative adult reactions (Punch, 2002). In organized and controlled environments such as schools or detention centres children may already “feel pressure to give ‘correct’ answers to research questions” (p. 328).

Meloni et al. (2015) argues that power is an “inevitable part of the research process” (p. 119). How we observe and navigate power relations create opportunities to “negotiate power roles” and address the power dynamics at work between researchers and youth (p. 119). The literature describes researchers as aware of the ethical issues that emerged while also acknowledging their failure to address them in satisfactory ways. Kumsa et al. (2015) explains that despite conscious attempts to create participatory research, centre youth’s knowledge, engage in reflexive practice, and decentre power inequities in the research process and design, they routinely slipped into power-laden roles resembling lecturer or “*the knower*” (Kumsa et al., 2015).

Also in connection to discussions of power, researchers explored the ethical complexities of adult-researchers conducting research on youth, including expressing concern that participants’ voices may be marginalized within the research process. The data youth contribute can be misrepresented and/or silenced in the research findings (Starkey et al., 2014). Institutional reviewers most likely will not ask for an explanation from researchers of how they will address the effects of their adult-centred analysis of youth-focused data and how their decisions about respectful representation of youth participants will be made. Researchers are left to question that for themselves, often in hindsight and not at the research design stage.

Punch (2002) reminds researchers that adult researchers will not be able to “totally understand the world from a child’s point of view” (p. 325). Even in the case of participatory action research (PAR), which encourages and supports youth participation, “the choice of which data to include and the interpretation of the data is in the power of the adult researcher” (Punch, 2002, p. 329). The literature we reviewed drew clear links between degree of youth involvement in research and ethical issues. For example, if youth are limited to involvement in data collection only, they have little say in how their contributions to the study are interpreted, analysed and represented as findings. In this situation, the adult-researcher perspective becomes paramount in the interpretation and analysis of data, and opportunities for misinterpretation of youth data increase. The same can be said of youth involvement in cross-cultural research. When the researcher is an outsider to the community cultural context as well as the youth culture, the possibilities for researchers to engage in respectful interpretation and analysis are limited (Garakani, 2014; Swartz, 2011). Although researcher positioning is commonly discussed in qualitative research projects, the influence of the researchers’ socially constructed identities (e.g., their gender, race, class, and sexuality) on decisions related to methods used, data analysis and data representation is less so (Tilley, 2016). Youth lose control over their contributions to the research and find their voices usurped by the adult researchers. As we develop our research on the school-to-prison pipeline, we take these cautions seriously. Although we bring expertise conducting research with criminalized and “at-risk” youth (Taylor) and have conducted research in a prison education context (Tilley), our racial, gendered, and professional identities will inevitably inform the research process and our work with marginalized youth (e.g., Susan’s White racial identity, Leanne’s Black mixed-race identity).

The fact that the authors of the articles reviewed were influenced by a critical theoretical lens contributed to their ability to unearth and critique the in-situ ethical issues that came to the fore as their research evolved. Although researchers made obvious their concern for ethics in

situ as they designed their research with ethics in mind, they also demonstrated the importance of researchers critiquing the impact of ethical decisions they made over time, and of working in the moment to move forward in respectful ways.

Parr (2010, p. 458) explains how she worked to develop a “shared and mutually respectful power relationship” with the children who were participants in her ethnographic study. They describe respecting the views of the children, creating a research space where they exercised agency in the research, as co-investigators. Liebenberg et al. (2014) chose multimodal methods (video production and participant reflection) to help researchers “better understand the context that informs participant experiences” and to enable participants to “understand the context of their experiences” (2014, p. 545).

The model of youth as co-researcher discussed in the next section attempts to address some of the ethical concerns related to research which situates youth on the sidelines.

### **Discussion: “Nothing about us without us”**

The articles we reviewed identified a range of methods to consider when conducting research with youth. The authors did not prescribe “models” that researchers should follow or apply but invited researchers to consider critically how youth research methods must take into account much more than the age of participants. Youth are not a homogenous population across research contexts and personal circumstances; youth connection to the research focus, research and life experience, level of trust established between researcher and participants, and other factors, matter. Researchers must incorporate their decisions related to methods into an ethical research praxis. Researchers who strive to involve youth as more than a source of data and who access a range of innovative methods, including digital, visual, task-based and action-oriented methods to encourage the emergence of the voices of their participants are demonstrating an ethical research praxis. When youth are involved in the process of creating and constructing data, researchers have opportunities to explore and better understand the lives of marginalized youth in ways that are meaningful to youth and others.

It is not surprising that the youth methods literature we reviewed also spoke about ethics in a variety of ways. A critical theoretical perspective to research requires researchers to ask difficult but essential questions about their methods. As Daley (2015, p. 131) explains, “Research ethics guidelines shape how research is done, and who it is done – or not done – with, and this has political consequences.” Even in contexts where researchers employ innovative methods (such as digital and visual methods) that speak to youths’ needs, interests, and identities ethical issues will arise that reflect the method. For example, with the growing use of innovative visual and digital methods, the degree of vulnerability of youth participants as a result of the construction of this visual data needs to be re-considered in light of the method.

Based on our critical review of the literature, we understand that certain methods lend themselves well to meeting the needs of youth participants in ethical ways. Researchers are shifting away from understanding youth as solely “sources of data” and toward engaging in research approaches that are participatory and involve youth in various stages of the research process, including design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings (Kumsa et al., 2015; Victor et al., 2016). Within these research approaches youth are characterized in ways that move beyond participant to include “research collaborators” and “co-researchers” and an attempt is made to account for, to varying degrees, the complex ways that power circulates throughout the research process. When youth are involved in all stages of the research process they can help develop and guide the ethical strategies employed by all involved in the research. For the youth in Kumsa et al.’s (2015) study, this meant being guided by the youth’s phrase: “nothing about us without us” (p. 424).

As we move toward our research initiative with youth travelling the school-to-prison-pipeline, we are particularly interested in methods that are not only participatory but involve youth in research in ethical and respectful ways. In a context where research is often used to “regulate youth and decenter their knowledge” (Kumsa et al., 2015, p. 427), ethical approaches to research must, in contrast, honour youths’ ways of knowing.

### **Possibilities for the Future: Moving Beyond Traditional Participation**

Participatory approaches not only seek to involve youth in the research but emphasize the importance of youth taking ownership of the research process. Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation Model is cited for its utility as a “beginning typology for thinking about children’s participation in projects” (p. 9). Hart suggests there are eight types of youth participation that can be ranked on a hierarchical scale. Research that engages with youth in ways that can be considered “manipulation,” “decoration,” or “tokenism” sit at the bottom rungs of the scale as youth are least involved in the process. Toward the middle of the scale, youth may be moderately engaged in the project and, for example, “assigned” to tasks or possibly “consulted” on the process in various ways. The highest level of participation on Hart’s scale is labelled “true participation” as it sees youth as engaged in shared decision-making roles with adults. Hart suggests that this highest rung of participation is quite rare.

In our review of the literature, few studies engaged with what Hart (1992) described as “true participation,” although many sought to consult and engage youth in “youth friendly” methods. These methods provided youth with a degree of control and input into the research. Those that came closest to “true participation” involved youth as co-researchers when youth not only contribute their knowledge to the research process, but also are involved in creating and implementing the research study. For example, Jardine and James (2012) explain how their youth co-researchers (high school students) were involved as members of the research team. The youth devised interview and photovoice questions, conducted interviews with other youth alone and alongside adult researchers, and had ongoing input into the research process. Suleiman et al. (2006) present a youth-driven approach to research where youth selected research topics that interested them and took a lead in conducting the research while adult researchers offered assistance with data collection and interpretation. Similarly, Kumsa et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of working with Youth Research Advisory Groups, groups that position youth as “agents of knowledge” and which support youth as they engage as “co-researchers in all phases of [the] research” (p. 421).

We see the literature on youth co-researchers as particularly useful for those engaging in research involving marginalized groups, especially those navigating the school-to-prison pipeline, racialized and indigenous youth, and those in other vulnerable positions. The articles point to how we can work with youth in collaborative and participatory ways to expose the effects of pipeline travel on youth while constructing “detailed snapshots” of the influence of the pipeline in youths’ lives (Krueger, 2010, p. 403). Researchers who employ these methods remind us that historically, research, including some participatory research “has been critiqued for not positioning youth as agents and experts on their own lives and for not including them in all phases of research” (Kumsa et al., 2015, p. 421). Some of the literature we reviewed addressed the benefits of engaging youth as researchers, particularly noting the emancipatory benefits, which afford youth control over the research process. Some benefits highlighted included: increased comfort level of student participants, more candid responses by youth who were interviewed by other youth, opportunities to create unique research questions from youth’s perspectives, a stronger impact on the youths’ community, deeper learning on the part of participants about the issue explored (e.g., effects of tobacco use), and a heightened sense

of ownership of the research among youth (Jardine & James, 2012; Krueger, 2010; Krueger-Henney, 2013; Punch, 2002; Swartz, 2013).

We are also mindful that despite the many potential benefits of involving youth in research, challenges will arise. As Garakani (2014, p. 250) asserts, "Reaching youth in any context is challenging." In the case of consent, REB gains a degree of legal protection for having a consent process in place that researchers must follow. If negotiations of consent become difficult, disruptions to the research might occur. For example, in the initial stages youth may choose not to participate at all because the consent process has taken an inordinate amount of time. Researchers may have to change aspects of their design, which can delay the start of the research and carry implications for funding. As the research proceeds, youth may choose to withdraw from the study if issues of consent become problematic (e.g., increased parental disapproval).

Challenges are exacerbated for a number of reasons: linguistic and cultural divides between researchers and youth; researchers' philosophical understandings of "youth" and the roles of "adults" in research; and, the extensive time needed for researchers to build trusting relationships with their youth participants. For example, in some Indigenous contexts, culturally insensitive attempts to acquire informed consent can lead to youths' disinterest and disengagement (Garakani, 2014).

Other challenges in youth research include institutional dynamics of the schools, prisons, and other institutional contexts in which researchers often must operate, the likelihood of response bias (youth may tell researchers what they want to hear to avoid judgement), or potential deviation from the original intention behind the study (Jardine & James, 2012; Robinson, 2015). Effectively negotiating emotional distress and vicarious trauma to the researcher are also described as challenges (Daley, 2015). As researchers proceed with their plans to conduct qualitative research with youth, they must, as Daley suggests, "develop their own moral parameters prior to beginning the research process so they can be prepared for how they might handle precarious situations" (p. 124).

Including youth in research is about more than just finding ways to produce credible research that represents youth experiences and voice in respectful ways. As Kim (2016, p. 42) asserts, "Critical theorists consider participation as a basic human right that allows participants to take control over their lives." As stipulated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), youth have a right to be involved in areas that affect their lives. Authors such as Daley draw inspiration from the UN Convention which holds "that where a child (defined as a person under the age of 18 years) is competent to develop his/her own views, that they be given the right to express these views in all matters that affect them" (p. 129). Research on/with/by youth affect youth if not in the immediate moment, perhaps in their future life trajectories. As we move forward with our research project, focused on youth travelling the school-to-prison pipeline, we will take what we have learned from the literature to find ways to engage youth as active participants in the research process so that we can meet our goal of collaboratively generating positive and meaningful outcomes for vulnerable youth and their communities.

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