

Creating the Conditions for Participatory Research and Professional Learning

Roundtable Discussion Document, May 19th 2026

Purpose of this roundtable

This roundtable explores the **methodological conditions through which participatory, dialogic and ethically grounded research functioned as a site for professional learning** with practitioners. It draws on a Reggio Emilia–inspired methodological strand of the wider project, which examined how participation, power and professional learning were negotiated within collaborative research spaces.

This table is included as a **deliberate outlier**. It does not focus on children or classroom practice directly, but on the **conditions that make participatory research and professional learning possible**. It is offered as **work in progress**, intended to open dialogue rather than present settled conclusions.

Why this matters

From the outset, this project was intentionally designed to work **participatively and dialogically**, with research and professional learning understood as closely interconnected rather than separate domains. This methodological stance shaped how relationships, dialogue, and knowledge production were approached from the beginning.

As the project progressed, our attention turned to how **participatory research processes themselves functioned as sites for professional learning**. Across the project, it became clear that participatory pedagogies with children are closely connected to how adults experience participation within research spaces—as practitioners, researchers, and policy actors.

This reflection suggests that:

- participation is not only a pedagogical or methodological concern, but a **relational, ethical, and emotional practice** enacted within research encounters;
- the design of participatory research environments shapes **what kinds of professional learning become possible**, including whether uncertainty, challenge, and vulnerability can be engaged with productively;
- moments of discomfort or uncertainty within participatory research are not failures, but can become **important learning sites**, when they are intentionally recognised and held with care.

Methodological orientation

This work was informed by:

- **Social constructionism**, positioning knowledge as co-constructed, situated and dialogic;
- A **Reggio Emilia-inspired methodological stance**, drawing on:
 - *progettazione* (iterative, responsive design),
 - *reciprocal formazione* (co-constructed professional learning),
 - *confronto* (dialogic exchange that welcomes difference and disagreement).

Rather than treating Reggio Emilia as a model to be implemented, it was used as a **conceptual-ethical orientation** shaping research relationships, learning spaces and dialogue. From a Reggio perspective, attention to relationships, dialogue, and the **significance of small moments** was central to how learning and meaning-making unfolded within the research process.

Key provocations: methodological conditions shaping professional learning

The provocations below reflect how **particular methodological choices shaped opportunities for professional learning and shift in thinking** within the participatory research process.

1. Participation required conditions, not just intent

Even when all participants valued participation, opportunities for professional learning were **fragile and context-dependent**. Time, trust, continuity, language, and facilitation shaped whether dialogue felt safe, generative, and capable of supporting reflection and learning.

2. Discomfort was a recurring feature of professional learning within participatory research

Teachers frequently experienced:

- uncertainty about expectations,
- anxiety about “getting it wrong”,
- discomfort with open-ended, multimodal methods or ways of working,

When recognised and held carefully, these moments often surfaced hidden hierarchies, assumptions about expertise, and the emotional labour of

professional learning, and became **important sites for reflection and shifts in thinking**.

3. Language mattered more than expected

Seemingly minor methodological choices (e.g. “presentation” vs “sharing”) significantly shaped:

- teachers’ sense of safety,
- perceptions of hierarchy,
- willingness to take intellectual and professional risks.

Professional learning was negotiated not only through structures, but through **everyday language and framing within research encounters**.

4. Flattening hierarchies was an ongoing, unfinished process

Despite strong commitments to partnership, traditional roles (researcher/practitioner; expert/novice) re-emerged at times—often subtly. Sustained professional learning required **active, ongoing relational work**, rather than one-off design decisions or stated principles.

5. Small adjustments had disproportionate significance

Small design changes—such as reframing tasks, slowing pace, or creating informal moments of connection—often supported **disproportionate shifts in thinking**, even where outward change appeared modest. Participants described these moments as significant in how they understood their professional role and what felt possible within their contexts.

Tensions this raises

This work surfaces a number of unresolved tensions, including:

- How do we balance **challenge and psychological safety** in participatory research and professional learning?
- When does discomfort become **generative**, and when does it become exclusionary?
- How can participatory research avoid reproducing the same hierarchies it seeks to disrupt?
- What does **ethical participation** require in time-pressured, accountability-driven systems?

These tensions are not framed as problems to be solved, but as **conditions to be navigated**.

Roundtable Orientation

Participants are invited to explore some of the following questions. You do not need to address them all.

1. What conditions within participatory research environments allow educators to express uncertainty, discomfort or vulnerability safely?
What gets in the way of these conditions?
2. How should participatory research respond to discomfort?
As something to minimise, or something to work with? Where are the ethical limits?
3. What can policymakers learn from this about **designing professional learning systems** that engage with research?
What is required beyond guidance or expectations?
4. How useful are Reggio Emilia principles (e.g. *progettazione*, *reciprocal formazione*, *confronto*) for participatory research with practitioners?
Where might they need adaptation?
5. What “small changes” in research or professional learning design have you seen make a significant difference to learning and participation?

What happens next?

Insights from this roundtable will be used to inform the next phase of outputs from the CPiS project, including policy briefings, guidance materials, and professional learning resources. Contributions will help shape how evidence is interpreted and mobilised, rather than being treated as final conclusions.

Participants are invited to remain involved in this ongoing dialogue. You can contact us on @child.participation@uwe.ac.uk



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This document is intended to support discussion and sense-making. It does not represent a final set of recommendations at this point in the project.