



"Walking the Talk": A Critical Meta-Methodology of Participatory Research Across AERA Journals

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“Walking the Talk”: A Critical Meta-Methodology of Participatory Research Across AERA Journals

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To better connect theory and research with practice, educational research organizations such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) urge scholars to cultivate meaningful partnerships with communities and schools. Despite these efforts, participatory research—especially that which comprehensively advances transformative, relevant, and equity-oriented goals across research processes—remains rare within the field. This meta-methodology analyzes articles published across AERA journals to answer the following question: In what ways do educational research articles braid participatory values discourse (“the talk”) with relational, reciprocal, and responsible methods (“the walk”)? Results illuminate the potential for such work to (1) value relationality through (re)allocation of researcher and participant roles, (2) value reciprocity through construction of community-determined transformative purposes, and (3) value responsibility through legitimization of partner expertise. The study offers implications for co-design, co-implementation, co-interpretation, and co-sharing of research, theory, and practice, as well as methodological recommendations for researchers and community leaders.

KEYWORDS: action research, collaboration, critical theory, discourse analysis, Indigenous peoples, meta-methodology, participatory, reciprocity, relationality, research methodology, research utilization, responsibility, social justice

A resilient critique of educational research focuses on its detachment from community needs and classroom practice (Biesta, 2007; K. Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Tuck, 2009b). Participatory research, which engages community members, teachers, stakeholders, and/or youth as members of a research team to co-design, co-implement, and co-disseminate scholarship, offers great potential for theory and research to transform practice *with* communities (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). While extensive conceptual scholarship advocates for expanded participatory approaches within education, such approaches remain under-implemented within the field, where the road to professional recognition is paved with conventional

methods, expectations perpetuated by academia and publishing industries, and hierarchical assumptions of expertise. Scholars, educators, and community partners often must “make the path” of methodological transformation “by walking it” (Rios et al., 1996, p. 23), in both research and practice.

This meta-methodology examines the ways educational research braids participatory values discourse (i.e., written words in articles and how those words reflect participatory values) with relational, reciprocal, and responsible methods to enact those values in practice (“the walk”). While this meta-methodology is not itself a participatory study nor is it an example of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), both participatory research theory (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) and van Leeuwen’s (2008) approaches to CDA informed its design. The project reviewed methodological discourse of 26 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies claiming a participatory orientation in journals published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) from 2000–2022. Specific questions framing this inquiry included:

1. How do discursive representations in participatory educational research allocate researcher and participant roles, and how do these representations enact the value of relationality?
2. How do discursive constructions of purpose in participatory educational research enact the value of reciprocity?
3. How does discourse legitimize community/participant authority in participatory educational research, and how does such legitimization enact the value of responsibility?

Defining Participatory Research

On a basic level, participatory scholarship challenges conventional researcher-participant roles, relationships, and responsibilities as it claims to prioritize justice-oriented values (Martinez-Vargas, 2022), decolonial action (Tuck & Guishard, 2013), and attention to a “democratic impulse” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 221). Such work emphasizes scholarly study *with* people, instead of study *on* people (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Denzin & Giardina, 2007). Tuck and McKenzie (2015) note that through participatory research “everyday people collaborate with (professional) researchers to identify research questions, select methods and design data collection instruments, collect and analyze data, interpret results and determine findings, and communicate findings to diverse audiences” (p. 88). Participatory research offers the potential to increase project success and transfer insights to practice (Caraballo et al., 2017; Ming & Goldenberg, 2021; Tabron & Thomas, 2023). As Ishimaru et al. (2019) explain, participatory approaches “take the idea of ‘walking our talk’ to heart . . . to enact the relational changes we wish to see in the world in the [research and change] process itself” (p. 12).

Given this conceptual foundation, participatory research is a broad “epistemological orientation” to research rather than a set of distinct or prescriptive methods, and it can therefore include qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007, p. 24). Such research is expansive, dynamic, and responsive to unique communities, contexts, and cultures. Within participatory

research, “communities” are defined in various ways (e.g., groups of individuals living in the same geographic contexts, groups of individuals with shared experiences, groups of individuals with similar interests, etc.), although across the diverse definitions, there is intentional recognition of both individual and collective understandings. Methods that support participatory orientations extend beyond member checks, snowball or network sampling, participant-observer field notes, and surveys of community needs. Therefore, participatory research offers a view and practice of research that is comprehensive and fundamentally different from other forms in its effort to disrupt researcher-participant binaries.

The broader orientation encompasses or overlaps with diverse sub-orientations and processes, including community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Israel et al., 2018; Northway, 2010), participatory action research (PAR) (Fine et al., 2004), youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2015), participatory design research (PDR) (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), and research-practice partnerships (RPP) (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Hopkins et al., 2019), all of which have unique epistemological—and methodological—needs and principles. Despite its breadth and diversity, participatory research typically claims three broad values:

1. It invites meaningful and sustained collaboration between (professional/academic) “researchers” and “participants” (e.g., youth, educators, community members);
2. It aspires to enact democratic and emancipatory values to expand participant and community control over processes and outcomes; and,
3. Its intent is to generate both social change and localized capacity-building by balancing research with action (Israel et al., 2018; Schwandt, 2007).

While scholars who support participatory values describe the need for research that is “humanizing” (Paris & Winn, 2014), “relational” (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022), “solidarity-driven” (Ishimaru et al., 2019), “cooperative” (Reason, 1994), “collaborative” (Penuel et al., 2020), and “decolonizing” (Patel, 2016; L. T. Smith, 1999), studies claiming a participatory orientation demonstrate extensive variability in terms of methodological detail and integrity. In many cases, single components of studies use participatory approaches, while others rely on conventional, researcher-controlled methods. Furthermore, as educational participatory work is often connected with pedagogy, understandings of rigor in terms of research methodology are susceptible to misconceptions about youth development, educator reflexivity, and community expertise. Instead of limited or tokenistic community member inclusion, braiding values discourse with methodological practice (i.e., “walking the talk”) requires comprehensive transformation of the methods researchers use to listen to, respond to, and partner with communities (Stanton, 2014; Tuck & Guishard, 2013; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

As Fine (2008) argues, *critical* participatory research is even more than an epistemological orientation—it is “a radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (p. 215). Such research disrupts “normatively powered dynamics . . . between

researchers and ‘the researched’” in order “to achieve transformative ends” (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 173) while minimizing exploitation, extraction, commodification, imperialism, and deficit thinking (Patel, 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Conventional “whitestream” (i.e., predominantly white, mainstream) (Grande, 2008) research often positions educational “gaps,” “problems,” or “deficits” as internal to minoritized contexts, thereby reinforcing racism and other forms of bias while neglecting community strengths and/or systemic influences. As Tuck (2009b) explains, “One alternative to damage-centered research is to craft our research to capture *desire* instead of damage” (p. 416).

Participatory research—critical or otherwise—is often questioned in terms of its legitimacy, at least as defined within academic circles, in part because of its attention to community interests/desires and focus on strengths instead of damage. As Caraballo et al. (2017) begin their review of YPAR in educational research, “Knowledges from academic and professional research-based institutions have long been valued over the organic intellectualism of those who are most affected by educational and social inequities” (p. 311). Academics may view participatory research with skepticism given its resistance to claims of objectivity and its trust of community member and youth interpretations, and participant involvement in research can be viewed as a threat to confidentiality and institutional control (Ali & McCarty, 2020). Within academia, the responsible research “authority” is usually the most senior and credentialed scholar. Similarly, as academic legitimization of knowledge typically happens through peer-reviewed publication, the “expert” is expected to “publish-or-perish.” As participatory processes do not always result in products valued or made visible within academia or industry, researchers may be discouraged from using such approaches unless their products are aimed at large audiences, university recognition, and profits. Funders may discourage participatory approaches through their expectations for investigators, who may be required to hold advanced academic degrees, to plan projects in detail, and to adhere to bounded timeframes.

As a result of these challenges, traditionally trained scholars may revert to the use of more familiar or popular mainstream/whitestream methods instead of striving to implement participatory approaches (I. Nelson et al., 2015; Stanton, 2014). Scholars may also resist participatory approaches due to the sustained and long-term engagement needed to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with community partners and to gain skills and knowledge needed to “work effectively with practitioners” (Denner et al., 2019, p. 1). Both academic and community partners may find participatory research timeframes to be overwhelming and/or frustratingly slow in terms of creating change. Relatedly, community partners may hesitate to engage in participatory work given views of research as inaccessible, elitist, or even a means of oppression (Fine, 2006; Paris & Winn, 2014; Petrone & Stanton, 2021; Tuck, 2009a, 2009b).

Participatory Research in Education and the Call for This Synthesis

In her AERA Presidential Address, Oakes (2017) explained that for “research to matter, that is, to better society and schools, it must escape the ivory tower and engage in the public sphere” (p. 91). In recent AERA conference proposal calls, organization leaders have encouraged scholarship that is “designed to matter in

public policy and practice” (2022) and “present in [contexts outside of academia], such as spaces of communal gathering, homes, schools, green spaces, neighborhoods, and informal places” (2023a). The entire 2020 theme, “The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good when Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate” (2019) encouraged collaborative research with community partners, and the 2022 call invited scholars to “work with families and communities as authentic partners” (2021).

Despite the call to increase integration of research with practice and communication with practitioners (K. Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014) and the growing prominence of participatory research across service-oriented fields such as health, economics, social work, community development, anthropology, and Indigenous studies (Draper & Seibert, 2004; Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Wallerstein et al., 2018), the orientation remains marginalized within the field of education (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2020; Patel, 2016). Few articles about and reviews of such work have been published within AERA journals. Most syntheses of participatory research have been specific to health or social work. One recent *Review of Educational Research* (RER) piece focuses on co-developing principles of and approaches to “collaborative education research with stakeholders” (Penuel et al., 2020, p. 627), although that work was the result of a collective discussion and conference, not a review, analysis, or synthesis of published articles.

While to date there has not been a comprehensive review of participatory approaches across the field of educational research, there have been reviews specific to PDR (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), YPAR (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Gibbs et al., 2020), RPPs (Vetter et al., 2022), and teacher action research in education (Morales, 2016); reviews that examine specific methods—such as PhotoVoice—that typically apply participatory approaches (Greene et al., 2018; Suprpto et al., 2020); and reviews that examine participatory approaches within very specific contexts (Green et al., 2022; Mosurska & Ford, 2020). Additionally, there have been reviews of research claiming epistemological orientations often considered complementary, or even integral, to participatory research. For example, Behar-Horenstein and Feng (2015) synthesized quantitative “emancipatory research” (p. 46). Furthermore, scholars have taken up questions about specific aspects and challenges unique to participatory research, such as collaborative analysis and dissemination experiences (Rix et al., 2021) and ethical issues regarding involving youth as co-researchers (Cullen & Walsh, 2020). Across recent reviews, there has been a call for more attention to participatory approaches within educational research, especially critical work focusing on issues of oppression or marginalization (e.g., Apugo et al., 2023; Cabrera et al., 2022; Cawthorn & Garberoglio, 2021; Chen & Horn, 2022; Kawano, 2023; Rousell et al., 2022).

A Theoretical-Methodological Framework for Synthesizing Participatory Research

Within meta-studies, boundaries between analysis of previously “processed” data (i.e., meta-analysis), analysis of theoretical frameworks (i.e., meta-theory), and analysis of methodological soundness (i.e., meta-method) can become blurry

(Paterson et al., 2001). Leading participatory research scholars and community partners also acknowledge “hybridity of theory and method” (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 173), and several of the articles included in this study emphasize the integration of theory and methodology within participatory research. For example, San Pedro and Kinloch (2017) call for “more inclusive, interconnected theories and methodologies” (p. 373S); Tachine et al. (2021) emphasize that “Since time immemorial, Indigenous methodology has been employed to theorize, problematize, and analyze life circumstances” (p. 4); and Ghiso et al. (2019) explain, “These [practitioner-oriented and community-based] orientations see theory and practice as intertwined activities” (p. 2).

Critical and comprehensive integration of theory and methodology is especially important for communities that have been historically minoritized within academia. For example, Brayboy (2005) notes the connection of theory, story, and methodology for Indigenous communities; Anzaldúa (2007) describes a hybrid space where experiences and theories intersect for “borderlands” communities; and Tuck and McKenzie (2015) draw attention to integration of theories, methodologies, and methods through critical place inquiry. Additional theoretical and methodological guidance for designing participatory, decolonizing, relational, and humanizing research has been offered by many scholars, including Archibald (2008), Bishop (2005), Brayboy et al. (2012), Cammarota and Fine (2008), Chilisa (2012), Freire (1970), Fine et al. (2004), González et al. (2005), Grande (2008), Israel et al. (2018), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), Kovach (2009), Martínez-Vargas (2022), Mirra et al. (2015), Northway (2010), Paris and Winn (2014), Patel (2016), Penuel et al. (2011), Reason and Bradbury (2008), Sabzalian (2019), L. T. Smith (1999), Stanton et al. (2024), Tachine and Nicolazzo (2022), Tuck (2009a, 2009b), Tuck and Guishard (2013), Wallerstein et al. (2018), Whyte (1991), Wilson (2008), and Windchief and San Pedro (2019).

Given this integration of theory and practice (and theory and research), a hybrid framework to integrate theoretical values “talk” with methodological “walk” was developed to guide this study’s design, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation processes and to structure representation of both theoretical and methodological insights. The framework integrates three values—relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility—collectively valued by practitioners, community mentors who have guided my learning about participatory research, and leading participatory scholars (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Fine, 2008; Mangual Figueroa, 2014; Northway, 2010; Paris & Winn, 2014; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022; Tuck & Guishard, 2013).

Relationality challenges conventional academic beliefs surrounding researcher and participant roles and how knowledge is shared between people (or between peoples and places, humans and more-than-humans, etc.). *Reciprocity* demands visible, ongoing, and meaningful action that responds to the needs and interests of community partners. Critical participatory understandings of *responsibility* engage a deep sense of obligation to communities and partners that transcends conventional accountability to institutional review boards and peer review processes. While these values—and their integration—are not new within educational scholarship (see, for example, Tuck & Guishard, 2013; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019), they have not previously been applied in a meta-study focusing on participatory research.

Fundamental to a participatory orientation is *relationality*—or the relationships between epistemologies and ontologies—experienced by co-researchers and community partners through and with topics, places, contexts, and each other (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022; Wilson, 2008). Despite the importance of this foundation, Bang and Vossoughi (2016) argue that there is a need for scholarship that examines the ways relationships are shaped and sustained within and across participatory studies in education. In theory, participatory research repositions the (professional/academic) researcher as a co-learner and recognizes community members as holding essential knowledge and power (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Israel et al., 2018; Patel, 2016; Wilson, 2008; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). This recognition and repositioning begins with critical positionality work by and between co-researchers.

To meet the demands of a participatory orientation more fully, positionality work must extend beyond individual self-reflexivity to collective sense-making, redefining of expertise, and repositioning of participants/co-researchers in leading self- and team-location efforts (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). Unlike other orientations, participatory approaches do not claim or desire neutrality or objectivity (Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Paris & Winn, 2014). Instead, they confront, deconstruct, and examine how researchers, participants, and their relationships influence, inform, and transform research processes and understandings (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). Such work requires critical reflexivity, particularly in terms of how researchers and community partners understand self-location, humility, dignity, and expertise (Tuck & Guishard, 2013).

While in the case of this study I looked mostly to the broader community of critical scholars recognized for their expertise in leading participatory, humanizing, Indigenous, and relational research, I am attentive to my own positionality and how that informs my thinking and relationships, as well as the design of this meta-methodology and the analysis and synthesis of the results. As a white woman who grew up in a conservative, predominantly white community in the Intermountain West, and as someone with extensive settler colonial intergenerational ties to the places where I have lived, taught, and engaged in research, I began my career as a teacher and scholar with limited understandings of how privilege, educational (in)justice, knowledge sovereignty, and research practices intersect. I am grateful for years-long (often, decades-long) mentorship in participatory research—especially research *with* Indigenous communities—from Cynthia Benally, Denise Bergie-Ute, Jordan Dresser, Brad Hall, Angela Jaime, Amanda LeClair-Diaz, Sergio Maldonado, Nicholas Rink, Francisco Ríos, Marsha Small, Aldora White Eagle, and Sweeney Windchief. I apologize to those mentors who are not recognized in this limited space.

Essential to walking the talk of relationality is what Archibald (2008) and other participatory scholars call participatory, collective, or collaborative sense-making. Broadly, relational participatory sense-making depends upon co-construction of understanding about complex social experiences through humanizing processes, which “involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). Processes such as dialogic spirals (San Pedro, 2013; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), design circles (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016), and informal conversations or pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) create and hold space for this work. Such processes critique and escape

“methodological individualism” that dominates—and limits—social research (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 494).

Participatory processes—such as collective sense-making activities—as well as their outcomes, demonstrate *reciprocity*, or a “giving-back” (Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiiem & Parent Nox Ayaawilt, 2019, p. 6), through meaningful, community-determined applications (Israel et al., 2018; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Northway, 2010; Tuck, 2009b; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). As participatory orientations cultivate co-learning, there is both a procedural and outcome-driven attention to the “reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and power” (Israel et al., 1998, p. 179). Throughout participatory research, action must be visible, ongoing, and meaningful to/for community partners (Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Most participatory research efforts include a focus on relevance through practice, action, and transformation (Martinez-Vargas, 2022).

While reciprocity focuses on the much-needed transfer of theory/research (the “talk”) to practice (the “walk”) to advance change, it is also a quality of participatory research that generates misunderstanding. Given the history of academic commodification of community knowledge, “reciprocity” does not necessarily mean equal exchanges of ideas and resources, nor does it mean equivalent benefits. For example, teams might name a community partner as a grant lead to ensure indirect costs (IDCs) stay within the community instead of going to an academic institution. In cases where inequities have created disproportionate opportunities, participatory researchers need to engage an “outward commitment” that defines, recognizes, and centers reciprocity in participant-determined “ways that are meaningful to the individuals, groups, and communities” that have experienced minoritization (Petrone & Stanton, 2021, p. 541).

Finally, participatory processes acknowledge and fulfill “our *responsibility* to the communities who have welcomed us” (*italics mine*) (Paris, 2014, p. 125). Tuck (2009a) explains that participatory scholars “approach research with a commitment to complex personhood, with a responsibility toward preparedness, listening, reflection, and reparation” and “from within collectivity” (p. 48). Such responsibility is realized through relevant, comprehensive, iterative, and dynamic processes that align with changing participants’ and community needs and interests (Archibald, 2008; Israel et al., 1998; Tuck, 2009b) and acknowledge strengths, assets, capabilities, expertise, and community and cultural funds of knowledge unique to participants/co-researchers and their contexts (González et al., 2005; Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Research Data Alliance International Data Sovereignty Interest Group, 2019). Collaboration must be integrated throughout research processes and across time and space (Israel et al., 2018; Stanton, 2014). Often, participatory research obligations are not merely academic or professional—they are intergenerational, “entwined,” or even genealogical (Tuck & Guishard, 2013, p. 12).

To “walk the talk” of participatory research in terms of responsible outcomes and products, critical participatory research extends beyond basic accountability measures. Relational scholars emphasize the importance of “answerability,” which Patel (2016) describes as the responsible stewardship of both ideas/knowledge and learning/methodology throughout the research process. Therefore, responsibility engages with questions of research purposes, ownership, humility,

recognition, and gratitude (C.Nelson & Shotton, 2022; Patel, 2016; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). For participatory work that strives to enact a critical and decolonial intent, knowledge that results from such work is not the “property” of the academic researcher or that person’s institution—it belongs, always has belonged, and always will belong to the community. Therefore, within critical participatory research, community partners control research content and processes, including determining whether and how to share knowledge both within and beyond the community (Israel et al., 2018; Parker, 2018; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

Methods, Data Sources, and Analysis Protocol

While this meta-methodology is not itself participatory, given its focus on “walking the talk” of transferring participatory theory to methodology, the participatory research tenets of relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility informed the study’s design. Furthermore, while this study is not itself an example of critical discourse analysis (CDA), CDA elements offered ideas to systematically examine ways participatory values discourse (the “talk”) reframes roles of social actors, the purpose of research, and the legitimacy of community/participant expertise. Broadly, discourse analysis describes a “theory and a method for studying how language . . . enact[s] specific social activities and social identities” (Gee, 2005, p. 1). *Critical* discourse analysis (CDA) applies understandings and aims of critical theory and scholarship to written, spoken, visualized, or performed discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008).

CDA offers powerful guidance for study of methodological discourse by supporting scholars as they examine discursive moves that claim to transfer values “talk” to research practice (i.e., the “walk”). While “traditional discursive reviews” have long informed meta-analyses and meta-syntheses in educational research (Suri & Clarke, 2009, p. 401), critical orientations to discursive analyses and syntheses are just beginning to influence the field. For example, only two articles referencing CDA were published by RER prior to 2015. In the case of this meta-methodology, CDA offers important guidance given marginalization of participatory approaches within educational research, the assumptions of power hierarchies reinforced through conventional research and syntheses processes, and the claim of many participatory studies to engage with critical theory. Furthermore, given that theoretical and methodological visibility remains largely dependent upon discourse in academic publications, CDA offers guidance for examining how participatory research has been and is made visible within the field.

Search and Selection Process

Systematic reviews are often framed by a priori protocols for inclusion and exclusion of studies, for development and application of explicit evaluative criteria, and for transparency and clarity of synthesis processes (Suri & Clarke, 2009). In the case of this meta-methodology, a multiphase search applied “purposefully informed selective inclusivity” standards (Suri & Clarke, 2009, p. 411) during a broad survey of articles claiming participatory orientations (i.e., “pre-search”), a focused search to develop and refine the sample, and a final search to expand the sample based on cited research and reference lists (i.e., “re-search”) (see Table S1, online only).

Despite the systematic sampling process used in this analysis, it is likely additional studies could have qualified for inclusion. Some studies that used participatory approaches may have been excluded because they do not foreground participatory terminology in their methods sections and/or search algorithms missed identification. Additionally, as authors represent their work in a wide variety of ways, including formats that do not fully detail research methods, it is likely that the final set of articles does not include all high-quality examples of participatory research published in AERA journals.

Presearch Across Fields

To offer insight regarding overall visibility of and accessibility to participatory research and to test the relevance of search parameters and research questions, the study first used the Boolean search string “participatory and research and education” and a limited publication timeframe (2000–2022) to conduct a Google Scholar “presearch.” To conduct similar reviews, other scholars have looked to the first ten pages of Google Scholar results to examine readability for, accessibility by, and inclusivity for nonacademic audiences (e.g., Blount-Hill et al., 2022; K. Smith et al., 2017). The popular search engine offers a “crawler-based web search,” which allows for greater inclusion and access than “curated” academic databases and repositories that often demand expensive institutional subscriptions (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020, p. 189). Notably, Google Scholar offers more comprehensive coverage of citations across databases than other search tools and includes “grey literature” (e.g., theses, white papers, reports, executive summaries, book chapters, etc.) in addition to peer-reviewed articles (Healey & Healey, 2023; Martín-Martín et al., 2018).

Although Google Scholar was not used to define the final sample for this meta-methodology (see the next section), it was chosen for the presearch given its participatory inclinations. The presearch generated over one million results, including articles, books, chapters, and reports. To further examine the relevance of the research questions, framework, and methods, the first ten pages of results were reviewed with attention to prominence of participatory approaches within educational research. Beyond the first ten pages, relevance in terms of search parameters for this study decreased (i.e., results became less about participatory methods) and redundancy increased (i.e., single studies were described in multiple publications).

The first ten Google Scholar pages (100 results) demonstrated that most (66 of 100) of the publications that met the initial search parameters were book reviews, conceptual pieces, meta-analyses, book chapters, or program descriptions, as opposed to peer reviewed articles describing original research. Eighteen of the remaining 34 research articles appeared in journals with an education focus (e.g., *Teachers College Record*). However, none of the 100 results generated during the presearch had been published in any AERA journals, demonstrating a need for focused sampling and analysis to learn more about the organization’s role in making participatory research visible within leading educational research.

Focused Search Strategy

Interpretive meta-methodologies often strive to deeply examine a small and purposeful sample of studies instead of providing an exhaustive review (Paterson et al., 2001; Suri & Clarke, 2009). Focusing on contemporary AERA journals was

a purposeful search strategy that sought to recognize relevance, influence, and responsibility. AERA is the largest professional organization dedicated to educational research in the world, with more than 25,000 active members across 96 countries (AERA website, 2023b). AERA's seven journals and annual conference are among the most prominent forces informing ethical guidelines, methodological innovation, and dissemination of educational scholarship within and beyond the field. All AERA journals are listed as "Quartile 1" publications by Schimago Journal and Country Rank (SCR). Journals published by AERA have broad international circulation, large readerships, emphases on recent research, and respected impact factors and rankings (Ahn, Ames, & Myers, 2012). Additionally, these journals publish across diverse methodologies and content, thereby offering a view of the broader field instead of focusing only on one area of specialization that might over- or under-represent participatory approaches. As articles published in *Review of Educational Research* (RER) and *Review of Research in Education* (RRE) focus on reviews of research rather than reporting of original research, my search targeted articles in the *American Educational Research Journal* (AERJ), *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics*, *AERA Open*, and *Educational Researcher*.

Various tools and databases were used to ensure search accuracy and accessibility. First, I used the SAGE Journals online search tool to bound the sample to articles published between 2000 and 2022 across focal AERA journals (see the conclusion section for information about articles published since 2022). Also using the SAGE tool, a Boolean search (participatory AND research AND education) yielded 161 articles. I confirmed that these 161 results were recognizable across popular educational research databases (ERIC, Educators Reference Complete), general academic and social science databases (Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, PsycInfo, and Web of Science Core Collection), and internet search engines (Google Scholar).

As meta-methodologies are not intended to be exhaustive evaluations of all examples but rather are used to explore a sample of examples in depth, several focused criteria were applied to further narrow the original group. I reviewed each of the 161 abstracts and downloaded those articles presenting original research *and* claiming to use participatory approaches in conducting that research. If the methods were unclear from the abstract, I reviewed the article's methods section to determine if participatory approaches were applied.

This process for including and excluding works was complex, as several studies focused on participatory practices in terms of content or context but did not apply participatory methods in terms of research process. For example, Thompson et al. (2019) used interpretive qualitative methods to analyze data collected from RPP activities. While the RPP itself enacted participatory approaches, the collection, analysis, and representation of RPP data was designed and implemented almost entirely *by* academic researchers instead of *with* RPP members. That said, this example illustrates the tendency for participatory scholarship to move back and forth across theory-research-practice lines: Members of the research team "co-design[ed] learning opportunities with district coaches" (p. 7) and two of the coauthors are district practitioners. Again, as an interpretive meta-methodology is not meant to be fully exhaustive in its review, examples such as this were excluded

while examples that more clearly, comprehensively, and consistently applied participatory methods throughout the research process were included.

During this phase, I also excluded conceptual or theoretical pieces, introductions to special issues, and reviews. For example, I did not include a piece published in *Educational Researcher* conceptualizing “community-based youth work” given that the empirical case presented in the article was used primarily to illustrate application of a framework instead of presentation of original research (Baldrige, 2020). I also conducted in-article searches to confirm methodological connections. To qualify for selection, article authors needed to be transparent in their intention to apply participatory *research* methods through use of “participatory,” a closely related term (e.g., “collaborative,” “relational,” “humanizing”), and/or specific participatory approaches (e.g., YPAR, CBPR) in the practice of their research. Articles that lacked clarity in terms of the relationships between research design and participatory methods were excluded. At the conclusion of this phase, the initial sample included 19 articles.

Re-search Strategy

To ensure search saturation and a robust sample, I conducted both meta-synthesis forward and backward snowballing (Ong et al., 2021) using articles in and beyond the initial sample. Forward snowballing, which in this case sought to recognize the relational influence of participatory scholars, involved review of articles published during the five years preceding the end of the study (2018–2023) in and beyond the target AERA journals. To qualify for this review, articles needed to reference articles in the initial sample and/or foundational AERA journal articles focusing on participatory research (e.g., Caraballo et al., 2017). The process identified 13 additional articles not included in the initial sample, with six meeting the selection criteria described. Backward snowballing, which identifies influential works missed during initial searches, consisted of review of references for each article in the initial sample. This process identified two more articles that met the selection criteria.

Description of the Sample

The multiphase search resulted in a final sample that included 27 articles (19 in the initial sample, six added during the forward snowballing re-search phase, and two added during backward snowballing re-search phase) (see Table S2, online only). Of these, 11 had been published in *AERA Open*, 13 in *AERJ*, 1 in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 2 in *Educational Researcher*, and none in the *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics*. To increase efficiency during analysis of topic-specific discourse, each of the articles in the final set was assigned to one of five topic groups (a–e): COVID-related research, community partnerships with educators, research with Indigenous Peoples, research focusing on researcher roles, and research with youth. Within these groups, individual articles were numbered randomly. The resulting number and letter combinations (e.g., 1b, 2b) provided a way to document and monitor discursive examples throughout the analysis. Finally, since 1a and 2a reported on the same study, only the most recent and complete version (2a) was included in the analysis.

Of the 26 analyzed studies, 2 were quantitative (both used instruments developed by communities), 22 were qualitative, and 2 used a mixed methods design. Ten articles cited central design structures that are fundamentally participatory, such as YPAR (three studies), PAR (two), PDR (three), and RPP (two). Like YPAR, PAR, and PDR, community-based research (CBR) and Indigenous research methodologies (IRMs)—which were applied in four studies each—are often viewed as orientations to research, as opposed to specific methodologies. In most cases, authors claiming these orientations also identified specific methods (i.e., the practices used to collect and analyze data) and/or methodologies (i.e., the overarching conceptual approach for developing study processes).

Analysis Protocol

This study applied an emergent synthesis design (Suri & Clarke, 2009), which allowed dynamic and iterative development of criteria, codes, and themes framed by the *a priori* values (relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility). Analysis consisted of summarizing study elements (e.g., type of study, topic, descriptions of participants/co-researchers, data collection methods); two rounds of discursive coding (descriptive values coding and focused methodological coding); determination of convergent and divergent values, practices, and exemplars; review for coverage and representation of all 26 studies; and development of a synthesis graphic and template to identify salient connections and examples. Throughout these phases, I used researcher memos to document my questions and emerging insights (see Figure S1 and Tables S3–S5, online only).

Each of the 26 articles was then reviewed in its entirety using line-by-line descriptive *values coding* (Saldaña, 2016). This initial round of coding served three purposes:

- to illuminate claims, definitions, examples, and ideas valued by the authors as a means of further describing the *a priori* values;
- to identify emerging patterns and develop a codebook to guide focused coding; and,
- to condense and refine the data in preparation for focused coding.

For the first round of coding, article “values talk” specific to participatory research was “chunked” and highlighted, and salient discursive markers, codes, and exemplars were identified and recorded (Saldaña, 2016). Each emergent code (e.g., “Futures,” “Power Disruption,” “Sustained Relationships”) was subcategorized and then associated with an appropriate *a priori* value. To serve as a check on the overall values coding, coded chunks and phrases were analyzed for discursive commonalities across articles and within each *a priori* value. For example, “codesign” appeared across articles and contexts, supporting the use of “participants as codesigners” as a code. At the round’s conclusion, a total of 15 descriptive values codes and 9 subcodes had emerged. Codes and subcodes were categorized to align with one of the *a priori* values and incorporated into a codebook (Tables 1 and S3, online only) to guide focused coding.

TABLE 1
Codebook Sample

A Priori Values	“The Talk”: Values Codes	“The Walk”: Methodological Codes
Relationality How do discursive representations in participatory educational research allocate researcher and participant roles, and how do these representations enact the value of relationality?	Relational values discourse ■ “Partnerships” with communities, youth, practitioners ■ Researcher “positionality” and “subjectivity” ■ Learning/researching “with participants”	Relational practice ■ Repositioning researchers and participants as co-learners ■ Committing to sustained, respectful, and trusting partnerships ■ Engaging collaboratively with self-reflexivity, positionality, and subjectivity work
Reciprocity How does participatory educational researcher discourse legitimize community/participant authority, and how does such legitimization enact the value of responsibility?	Reciprocity values discourse ■ “Transformation” ■ “Power” differences ■ “Futures” ■ Partner “visibility,” “(re)presentation,” “voice” ■ “Benefits” to partners	Reciprocal practice ■ Centering partner voice, visibility, and (re)presentation ■ Ensuring meaningful benefits, processes, and outcomes ■ Acting in the present; planning for collective futures
Responsibility How does discourse legitimize community/participant authority in participatory educational research, and how does such legitimization enact the value of responsibility?	Responsibility values discourse ■ Participants’ “strengths,” “creativity,” or “expertise” ■ “Responsibility” to community ■ “Flexibility” ■ Participant-controlled design, methods, and sharing ■ Validity, trustworthiness, and “accessibility”	Responsibility practice ■ Honoring partner strengths, desires, and expertise ■ Recognizing an obligation to listen and respond to the community ■ Planning and practicing flexibility ■ Co-determining methods for flexibility and accessibility

The studies in the meta-methodology also informed and refined the codebook, as emergent codes identified during first-round descriptive values coding (middle column) added to understanding of the *a priori* values (left column). Eight values codes and subcodes were categorized with relationality, nine codes and subcodes categorized with reciprocity, and seven codes and subcodes categorized with responsibility. The examples included both exemplar quotes from individual articles and lists of discursive terms applied across multiple articles. A third column (right) was included to add focused codes and examples during the second round of coding, which analyzed methodological discourse. The most frequently used codes provided a foundation for synthesis of prominent themes and subthemes across the different studies. However, the codebook also offered space for divergent codes and examples to ensure methodological inclusivity, thereby addressing an important consideration for meta-syntheses broadly and meta-methodologies specifically (Suri & Clarke, 2009).

The second, focused round of coding examined if/how authors “walked the talk” as evidenced through their reported practice. For a second time, participatory values discourse throughout each article was reviewed on a line-by-line level, regardless of whether it was located in the methods section or not. If the discourse was connected to a specific methodological practice, methodological codes and subcodes were developed, situated in relationship to the first round codes and subcodes, and added to the codebook (right column). During this phase, the data was streamlined and reorganized to clarify or eliminate redundancies and combine similar subcodes. To further connect theory and discourse (“the talk”) to methodology (“the walk”), action verbs and methodological practices were used to describe second-round codes/subcodes. Fifteen focused codes and 17 subcodes emerged through this process. The raw data (i.e., all relevant examples across the 26 articles) were recorded and exemplars for focused codes and subcodes were identified, with a goal of ensuring broad representation of sample articles.

The third and final round of analysis synthesized the focused codes and subcodes within each *a priori* value as informed—in basic ways—by CDA ideas and categories. Broadly, van Leeuwen (2008) invites examination of discursive “representing [of] social actors”—or “participants” in social activities (p. 23). In the case of this study, the “participants” are the authors of the articles (i.e., social actors typically called “researchers”) *and* community members in their studies (i.e., social actors typically called “participants” or “subjects”), while the “social activities” are the research activities made visible by the authors through written methodological language. To holistically situate, synthesize, and represent the framework values (i.e., relationality, reciprocity, responsibility), the focused codes (e.g., repositioning co-learners, ensuring meaningful research processes and results, honoring strengths and expertise), and critical discursive moves (e.g., role allocation, construction of purpose), I developed a synthesis graphic (see Figure S1, online only) and synthesis template (see Table S4, online only).

Results: Synthesis of Methodological Discourse in Participatory Educational Research

This study integrated theory shaped by participatory research with that broadly informed by CDA to examine ways 26 participatory research articles (1)

(re)allocate the roles and *relationships* of researchers and participants to disrupt conventional researcher-participant binaries, (2) transform the purpose of research to expand community-determined understandings of *reciprocity*, and (3) advance critical understandings of *responsibility* by legitimizing community/participant expertise (see Table S5, online only). To illuminate the influence of critical participatory research values (i.e., “the talk”) on methodological practice (i.e., “the walk”), first round values codes were refined using practices common to CDA to inform the methodological coding process. Several of van Leeuwen’s (2008) CDA categories of representation and construction guided systematic analysis of the focused codes and supported deeper connections to and insights about each of the a priori values (relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility). While the codes were situated to align primarily with one of the three a priori values, there was extensive overlap and fluidity. This interconnectedness mirrors the overall process of participatory research in its dynamic, iterative, and boundary-crossing nature.

Relational Discourse in Practice: (Re)Allocating Partner Roles

Across the studies, authors “walked the talk” of relational participatory discourse to define, critique, and (re)allocate participant roles and relationships (van Leeuwen, 2008). Overall, participatory relationships were made visible through methodological repositioning of participants from “subjects” to “co-researchers” and “researchers” to “co-learners,” committing to sustained and long-term commitments to partnerships, and engaging with self-reflexivity, positionalities, and subjectivities. Importantly, as described explicitly in the methods sections of the studies, these (re)allocated roles and relationships extended across all phases of research.

The articles often referred to academic scholars, community members, youth, teachers, and other social actors engaged in the research process as “coresearchers” (five studies), “partners” (six studies), or members or representatives of a formal or informal research “partnership” (12 studies), “collective” (two studies), “collaborative” (three studies), “team” (10 studies), and/or “community” (15 studies). The studies’ methodological discourse further revealed purposeful attention to re-envisioning roles of and relationships between researchers and participants during data collection and analysis. Specific methods included “open-ended” (e.g., 2a, 4e) or “conversational” (e.g., 2b, 2d) interviews; “dialogic” processes (e.g., 4a, 6d); “pláticas” (talks) (e.g., 3b, 4c); “sharing,” “design,” “community,” or “talking” “circles” (e.g., 3c, 5a); interactive “video” (e.g., 5c, 3e) or “photo” (e.g., 1b, 2a) methods; and “journaling” (by both participants and researchers) (e.g., 2e, 4a).

For many of the articles, recognizing and engaging actively with subjectivity, positionality, bias, power, and privilege proved foundational to recognition and representation of participants—both the authors/co-researchers and the participants/co-researchers. Fourteen of the articles included positionality statements, and five incorporated explicit descriptions of dialogic sense-making or “inter-learning” about co-researcher and team identity. While self-location work is becoming standard practice, particularly within critical qualitative research, it is this collective sense-making about individual *and* collective positionality that

distinguishes participatory work from other orientations. For example, Article 3e (Mirra & Garcia, 2022) described complex interpersonal processes associated with recognizing and examining subjectivities during participatory work:

Instead of seeking to minimize our subjectivities, we made them transparent in our interactions with participants through explicit meta-conversations about the design process and continuous efforts to sustain mutually constitutive, beneficial dialogic relationships. (p. 353)

This example also demonstrates another key value foregrounded by the authors—committing to sustained, respectful, and trusting partnerships—in practice. Within participatory research, such relationality extends far beyond the typical boundaries of research design and process, and it results in deeply interpersonal connections that make identity, bias, and positionality transparent. As Garcia and Delgado Bernal (2021) described in Article 4b:

While this study took place at a specific place, time, and date our relationships with our co-collaborators extend beyond this article. Often our personal and professional lives interact as we all navigate academia, and a reciprocal trust was created that honors their oral histories as we write academic articles. (p. 576)

Effective and respectful relationships are dependent upon “reciprocal trust” (thereby spanning both the relationality and reciprocity values). Such trust takes extensive time and commitment to develop. Fourteen studies noted “long-term” (nine), “years” long (four), or even “decades-long” (one) partnerships with community co-researchers. Eight studies also emphasize plans for partnerships to be “ongoing” (five) or “continued” (three) beyond their article’s framing of the study. In these examples, co-researchers view partnerships as life-long personal and professional relationships. Of course, as noted by several authors, this view is often in tension with expectations held by academic institutions, publishers, and funders.

While most of the articles focused on relationships between adult co-researchers, eight described efforts to cultivate research relationships between youth/children and adults (e.g., teachers, authors). These articles critiqued an assumption common to educational research that positionality work—especially if it involves critical examination of others and the relationships between peoples—is difficult, if not developmentally inappropriate for young participants. As Gavin (2021) explained in Article 4a, even very young co-researchers can offer important insights regarding positionality and access to knowledges/understandings:

I reflected on how to position myself, as I was not a teacher nor parent at the school, and on how I was positioned by the children. One child suggested that I was a visitor, both to the school and to the children’s lives. (p. 4)

In developing the focused codes for this project, it became clear that (re)positioning and (re)allocating of roles proves integral to making relational values

visible in participatory research practice. For example, the authors of Article 1d (I.Nelson et al., 2015) explained:

This groundwork made possible a second phase [of collaboration with community partners], during which researchers continued to deepen and expand relationships with community partners, using existing ties to reposition themselves as invited collaborators in community-driven working groups rather than as leaders or conveners. (p. 20)

Similarly, six articles privileged “co-learning,” partner “expertise,” and community insight to challenge assumptions of objectivity, researcher and participant authority, and relational power dynamics. Notably, for several of the articles, such repositioning included explicit attention to engaging with co-researchers not only during the selection and implementation of research methods, but in terms of theorizing, interpretation, and representation of knowledge. For example, in Article 4d, Draper and Siebert (2004) described the “coconstruct[ion]” of theories through participatory research:

Cooperative inquiry, along with other forms of participatory or collaborative research, has typically been described as research done in conjunction with individuals who have traditionally not been part of the theory generation done by researchers . . . we acted as coresearchers and correspondents to coconstruct theories that honored both our perspectives. (p. 933)

Reciprocal Discourse in Practice: Transforming Purpose

To “walk the talk” of participatory values in practice, discourse across the 26 articles re(constructs) the *purpose* (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 124–135) of research as grounded in reciprocity by centering partner voice, visibility, and (re)presentation; ensuring meaningful benefits, processes, and outcomes that respond to community needs and interests; and acting in the present while planning for collective change in the future. For example, nine articles identified methods to “create change” (four), co-develop “solutions” (three), and generate “new opportunities” in educational contexts (two). Notably, many of the studies committed to transformation of the purpose of research from a purpose that advances individual and institutional notoriety to one that is community-determined. Essential to such transformative discourse was a focus on “centering” (six studies), “amplifying” (two), or “privileging” (three) the visibility, representation, voice, stories, and decision-making for/with participants/co-researchers, especially for/with youth and people of color. For example, in Article 5e, Lyons et al. (2020) explained that in the case of the focus participatory study, “The marginalized voices came from students who often are barred from acting as leaders and decision makers in their schools” (p. 4). Such discourse was grounded in acknowledgment of the need to create and hold space for “counternarratives” and “counterstories” (used by four articles).

Closely related to authors’ efforts to center participant voice as a means to disrupt conventional power structures was acknowledgement of the usefulness of research to benefit participants and communities in multiple ways. These included monetary compensation and other incentives such as gift cards and pizza parties

(three studies), and while such benefits are often appreciated by partners and important in participatory research, there are many other ways authors ensured meaningful benefits for participants. Other benefits included “skill development” (one study), “professional development” (three), “co-teaching” (one), and “capacity-building” (four) support related to research focusing on teaching and learning. For example, in Article 3d, San Pedro (2018) noted:

Reciprocity challenges western research methods that work to extract information from communities and people without giving back what has been learned. Rather, the knowledge shared ought to be given back to communities and participants so they have further opportunities to learn and grow with us, and us with them. (p. 1200)

This example also demonstrates the synthesis and intersections between reciprocity and relationality, in that “giving back” support and knowledge to communities and participants is integral to sustained relationships and future research.

Importantly, the authors of various articles recognize that “support” and “benefits” must be responsive to participant needs and interests, as identified by participants themselves (e.g., 2a, 3a, 1c, 1d). Participants—including young participants—need to be able to identify and advocate for their needs, including those related to developing research skills, as demonstrated by Castillo et al. (2021) in Article 3a: “At the youth interviewers’ request, we cosponsored an event prior to their data collection focused on trauma-informed interviewing” (p. 5). Similarly, four studies noted that due to the emotional impact of research, participants needed emotional support.

Twelve of the articles recognized and valued participant-determined needs and interests as situated within collective or social “futures.” For example, in Article 5a, L. A. Gutiérrez et al. (2022) emphasized “[our methodology] is also committed to creating change in the here and now while collectively imagining new possibilities for the future” (p. 4). While this “commitment” is common across critical orientations to research, participatory research illuminates the need for participants to be actively involved throughout the “imagining” process. Thirteen articles noted the “ingenuity” or “creativity” made possible through shared “dreaming” and/or “visioning.”

To respond to community- and participant-determined needs, interests, hopes, and desires, authors underscored the importance of flexibility, compassion, and enthusiasm, especially since support often extends beyond boundaries of specific research projects. For example, in Article 3b, Jimenez (2020) detailed ways she supported her co-researcher:

I collaborated with a sixth-grade teacher to interrogate, design, and implement critical and culturally relevant pedagogy with her predominantly immigrant Latina/o ‘ELL’ students. . . . We co-taught our design lessons, which built on students’ lived experiences and family histories. Sometimes the teacher took the lead, at other times I led, and at others we collaboratively taught. . . . During the remainder of the school day, when we were not implementing design lessons, I assisted the teacher as a volunteer and made fieldnote observations throughout the day, as time and class structure permitted. (p. 786)

In this example, co-developing and co-teaching lessons with a transformative purpose in mind resulted in a direct benefit for the teacher (i.e., resources she could use). However, benefits did not end there—the author also provided classroom “assistance” beyond the scope of the project.

Almost all the articles extended understanding of transformative purpose and reciprocity beyond individual relationships to community and societal scales. Twenty-four of the articles explicitly used social justice-oriented discourse such as “power,” “privilege,” “overturn,” “liberation,” “emancipation,” “resistance,” “take control,” “counter,” “challenge,” “decolonize,” and “disrupt” to encourage readers to critically examine “the researcher/participant binary” (e.g., 2d), “power differentials” between academia and communities (e.g., 6d), research and institutional “structures” (e.g., 5b, 4c, 1e), and/or “Eurocentric”/“settler colonial”/“normative” research tools, systems, and processes (e.g., 5a, 5c, 2e). However, not all the studies articulated a commitment to a socially transformative purpose, and article 4d (Draper & Seibert, 2004) sought to disassociate itself altogether from a social justice orientation, noting:

Because cooperative inquiry often involves the consideration and legitimization of marginalized voices, it has become associated with research for social change. However, cooperative methodology was also a legitimate methodology for a study such as ours. (p. 933)

Responsible Discourse in Practice: Legitimizing Partner Expertise

This idea of participatory research as “legitimate methodology” is not only important in terms of recognizing the need to include community-determined interests in shaping research (i.e., reciprocity), it is also vital in terms of methodologically “walking” the theoretical “talk” as it repositions community partners as research *authorities* (van Leeuwen, 2008). Overall, the authors of the studies applied purposeful discourse to legitimize the strengths, desires, and authority of partners; recognize an obligation to listen and respond to the community; and co-determine methods to support flexibility and accessibility.

Many of the articles used discourse to challenge conventional notions of “expertise” by valuing community and participant “strengths” (eight articles), “assets” (six), “funds of knowledge” (three), pedagogies or knowledges of “home” (nine), and/or “community cultural wealth” or “wealth of knowledge” (six) as essential for responsible and accurate understandings about the topics and/or research processes. As Gavin (2021) suggested in Article 4a, researcher responsibility is closely tied to recognition of and respect for participant “innovations and ingenuity” (p. 4). Many of the articles situated acknowledgment of community and participant strengths as part of researcher “obligations” (e.g., 5b, 1e) or “responsibilities” (e.g., 1c, 2d) to “honor” (e.g., 2a, 6e) and “learn from” or “learn alongside” communities (e.g., 5b, 1d) about those strengths. Associated with this move is explicit awareness of minoritization of community and participant knowledges by “traditional” research structures and academic institutions.

Ten of the studies emphasized the importance of “deep listening” (four) and “witnessing” (six) by participatory co-researchers. As Sánchez (2021) explained in Article 4c:

In bearing witness to the participants’ testimonios, I was able to engage in open and vulnerable reflections alongside them—strengthening our friendship and connection well beyond the purposes of the study. (p. 5)

As “witnessing” extends beyond basic “listening” in its demand for the researcher’s silence, stillness, and reverence, this author demonstrated a way that discourse can construct and legitimize participant knowledge, story, experience, and sharing—all of which are essential for recognition of expertise and authority within participatory research. Similarly, in Article 3d, San Pedro (2018)—referencing Patel (2016)—suggests that “rooting the sharing and listening of stories in research” helps shift knowledge “from being a commodity that some have and others don’t toward a reframing of knowledge as the accumulation of information” (pp. 1199–1200).

While the studies all drew in some way upon conventional data collection methods, such as surveys, formal interviews, observations, and focus groups, 15 emphasized ways participatory approaches transform these methods from being “extractive” to “legitimized” and “collaborative.” Across these examples, authors endeavored to be a part of the conversation or a witness to community knowledge, instead of outsider experts who are independently responsible for research planning and sense-making. Many of the articles used methods that support dialogical design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as practices such as “network,” “snowball,” or “chain sampling” (e.g., 4b, 4c, 1d, 3e) to encourage participants to tap into their local expertise and connections. Nine engaged participants/co-researchers in “co-construction” of research topics and questions and development of data collection tools such as interview protocols, surveys, and observation tools. For example, in Article 3a, Castillo et al. (2021) described “codesigning the semistructured interview protocol with youth” and using “frequent check-ins” to discuss the process and protocol collectively (p. 4). Across the studies, design processes, as well as data collection, analysis, and interpretation activities, often included collective discussion methods, such as talking “circles” (four studies).

Methodological transparency is important in terms of responsibility and answerability, and this study revealed that a majority of studies (20 of 26) offered numerous (i.e., more than five) descriptors of specific co-determined methods. Of particular note, 18 studies demonstrated clear efforts to “walk the talk” of participatory values through descriptions of their methods of analysis and interpretation. Authors used “journaling” to guide self-reflection (e.g., 4a, 1b, 2e), “spirals” to frame dialogic analysis (e.g., 2d, 1e), and “negotiated” interpretation (e.g., 4d, 5d, 6d). Often, multimodal formats supported this collaborative work and increased accessibility. For example, in Article 1b, Sosa-Provencio (2019) described use of familiar office supplies to guide an accessible process of theme development, synthesizing, and co-theorizing:

We used pens, markers, highlighters, and sticky notes to name preliminary themes, to connect to familial histories and to the theorizing that was taking place between participants and their family members, and to forge collective themes. (p. 1124)

In Article 4a, Gavin's (2021) child co-researchers used "Padlet posts" to share understandings "multimodally in images, words, and emojis" (p.6). In two of the studies (5a, 5c), participants were able to "curate" their own stories using digital media or PhotoVoice, thereby engaging them directly in the condensing, organization, and representation of data. Relatedly, 10 studies described opportunities for participants/co-researchers to engage in multimodal co-sharing of study results, including co-presentation at conferences and workshops, co-publishing in academic journals, and co-creating exhibits for community members.

Five studies noted multimodal reframing offers a "source of strength" or access to "cutting-edge" insights. In addition to more common qualitative methodologies such as oral history (used by two studies), case study (three), ethnography (four), and CDA (two), five articles noted use of emerging methodologies such as Storywork (5c, 2d), *Testimonio* (1b, 4c), and PhotoVoice (5c), which are often, if not always, participatory in nature. Such methodologies offer opportunities to advance critical, community-legitimized participatory work.

Discussion: Braiding Participatory Values "Talk" With the Methodological "Walk"

The primary purpose of this meta-methodology is to determine the ways articles in leading educational research journals braid participatory values discourse ("the talk") with relational, reciprocal, and responsible methodological practice ("the walk"). The metaphor of "weaving" or "braiding" "talk" with the "walk" is particularly apt when applied to participatory research, given such work's intent to integrate theory and values discourse with methods, practice, and transformative action (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022). All the articles reviewed in this meta-methodology recognized the dynamic and interconnected nature of researcher and participant knowledges, expertise, interests, and interactions, and five used specific discourse such as "braiding" and "weaving" to describe the connections between relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility that are vital to participatory research.

The Central Strand: Practicing Relationality to Advance Methodology and Theory

The relationality strand of the theoretical-methodological framework proved integral to insights synthesized across this meta-methodology, as it is the value that anchors the others. Without authentic and sustained relationality, meaningful reciprocity would be unlikely, and responsibility might fail to connect theory and research to practice and change in relevant ways (Israel et al., 2018; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Research that is fully participatory demands "deeply relational intellectual and emotional labor" and "methodological sensibilities and skills that are attentive to issues of power" (Ghiso et al., 2019, p. 1). Participatory scholars, practitioners, and community partners often emphasize the importance of

engaging in research *with* participants instead of on them (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

As the studies synthesized in this meta-methodology demonstrated, discursive representations of relationality reflect a shift in the researcher-participant binary through (re)allocation of roles, power, and agency. In Article 3d, San Pedro (2018) explains:

Creating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships (even after the research project has “concluded”) provides storying interactions where our truths (within that moment) become interconnected with participants’ storied realities. In this way, our stories are interconnected, linked, braided. (p. 1197)

Similarly, the plans and experiences documented within articles included in this study offer examples of “interconnected stories” that highlight the centrality of “creating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships” through participatory research. This synthesis drew upon what van Leeuwen (2008) terms *role allocation* (pp. 32–35) to examine ways the various “participants” view their roles and relationships as grounded in theories, positionalities, and subjectivities; how they interact with, relate to, and support each other through specific research methods; and how they are (re)positioned in relation to each other through participatory research processes.

To advance *methodological* collective sense-making, authors described using dialogical/conversational methods, shared storying/witnessing, and explicit discussions about power and positionality. The need for highly relational work is founded upon a recognition of, and reverence for, unique community and participant strengths and expertise that lead to new knowledge, cutting edge perspectives, and transfer to practice (Martinez-Vargas, 2022). Such reciprocal exchanges of insights depend upon responsible access to and sharing of data and findings, often through emerging and critical methodologies, dialogic methods, and multimedia products and presentations (Parker, 2018; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

Additionally, the authors often drew attention to the potential for participatory research processes to advance *theoretical* collective sense-making. Engaging with theory, while often viewed as the exclusive domain of academics, can be an important activity for co-researchers and community partners, especially within critical participatory research. Six of the articles in this study applied “grounded theory,” which Miles et al. (2014) explain “uses a series of cumulative coding cycles and reflective analytic memoing to develop major categories for theory generation” (p. 8). However, grounded theory is not inherently participatory. In the case of several studies in this meta-methodology, “theory generation” was the result of (only) the academic researcher’s interpretation, while “views of participants” were represented exclusively within the data collected during the study.

As theory, research, and practice are interwoven within communities, especially those that have been minoritized (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Brayboy, 2005), cultural or community protocols can and should inform interpretations within participatory research. Therefore, the theories, processes, and practices used to guide participatory studies may pre-date the study’s design. For example, instead of

claiming to use “grounded theory,” Bishop et al. (2014) apply values emphasized by Kaupapa Māori, which as the authors explain “is a discourse of proactive theory and practice, developed by Māori scholars in New Zealand” (p. 188).

Stronger Together: Reenvisioning Reciprocity Throughout Research Design

As Tuck and Guishard (2013) note, and as the results of this meta-methodology affirm, the main purpose of participatory research is to create action to address community-determined needs and interests both within the present and future. Similarly, van Leeuwen (2008) encourages analysis of the “discursive construction of purpose” (pp. 124–135), which includes evaluating the ways discourse attends to *means-oriented action* (pp. 128–130). As van Leeuwen (2008) explains, such action can be “future-oriented,” as it “may be constructed in terms of its *potential* for serving certain purposes” (p. 129). Furthermore, participatory research differs from participatory action or practice in that it extends beyond a bounded intervention or activity. Such work demands sustained collaboration that reenvisions both relationality and reciprocity *throughout* and *beyond* planning, intervention/practice implementation, and analytical, interpretive, and dissemination processes. Tuck and Guishard (2013) emphasize that action “cannot be reserved just for the final stages of a project” (p. 20)—participatory research should enact action and create change before, during, and after the formal research project.

Attending to collective, future-oriented goals not only requires respect for existing community expertise, but it also demands holding space for community partners to describe “desire-centered” interests that shape the future and to do so in their own ways and using their own words (Tuck, 2009b). Unfortunately, in scholarship surrounding participant voice, discursive constructions such as “give voice” or “empower” can suggest a dependency on the researcher-as-expert (or, even, researcher-as-savior). As situated within the value of reciprocity, participatory researchers recognize a responsibility to move beyond simply including participant voice to honoring self- and community-determined interpretations of that voice.

While conventional academic educational research often focuses on hierarchical and linear understandings of needs, expertise, solutions, and power by excluding self- and community-determined voices, interpretations, and worldviews, the majority of the studies in this meta-methodology sought to advance a “democratic impulse” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 221) and justice-oriented values (Martinez-Vargas, 2022) while challenging normative assumptions of power and expertise (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Patel, 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Most of the articles in this study used discourse to avoid what van Leeuwen (2008) terms *deagentialization* (p. 66) by elevating attention to participants’ “self-empowerment” (e.g., 2c, 1e) or “agency” (e.g., 4a, 4b, 2d). In terms of practices that endeavored to “walk the talk” surrounding individual agency, the authors provided explicit attention to the need for listening and responding to participant voice through dialogue about methodological decisions, research design, and implementation of interactive methods. Attention at systemic or structural levels was also noted through both theoretical and methodological language, with 24 articles explicitly engaging discourse associated with social transformation and justice.

Despite its importance within participatory research, in this meta-methodology it was sometimes difficult to evaluate the transfer of theoretical reciprocity to methodological practice given the tendency of authors to use vague language (e.g., “we discussed power differences” and “develop[ed] a plan”). Readers may be left wondering, “What did these discussions entail?” and “What was the process for developing the plan?” This vagueness illuminates the difficulty in shifting theory to practice through written discourse, especially when a purpose is socially “constructed” by individual researchers and authors (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Wrapping Around: Responsibility to Center Community Authority

In terms of “walking the talk” of participatory research, responsibility to communities and participants is essential for connecting theory to methodology (Israel et al., 1998; Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007; Northway, 2010; Penuel et al., 2020). Throughout many of the articles analyzed in this study, this sense of responsibility transcends conventional researcher-participant relationships and understandings of reciprocity. Participatory scholars recognize responsibility by *centering* decision-making of community partners in flexible and accessible ways. Furthermore, within critical participatory research, community partners are recognized not only as legitimate knowledge carriers but also as research authorities in terms of both theory and methodology. Within CDA, van Leeuwen (2008) recognizes dynamic and complex discursive constructions of legitimacy, particularly through *authorization*, which seeks to address the question, “Who can exercise this authority, and how?” (p. 106). This meta-methodology revealed multiple insights surrounding author discourse and partner authority as connected to responsibility, trustworthiness, validity, and other aspects of legitimization.

Analysis and synthesis of the articles’ methodological discourse revealed that most of the analyzed studies adhered to participatory epistemologies in legitimate (i.e., rigorous, comprehensive, and valuable) ways. Participatory scholars have long challenged assumptions that pursuit of context-specific “practicality” in research is inferior to other pursuits (i.e., those that claim to “advance” theoretical knowledge in generalizable ways), arguing instead that participatory research can link “imagined possible futures to consequential forms of change that impact communities in the here and now” (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 178). In fact, multiple studies in this meta-methodology, including both mixed-methods studies, demonstrated the potential for participatory research to *advance* interpretations of legitimacy, rigor, validity, trustworthiness, and reliability, given increased attention to community needs and interests.

That said, as is true with all aspects of research (re)theorizing, design, practice, and dissemination, participatory approaches can be applied with wide variation of integrity and comprehensiveness. Methods and methodologies can be implemented to align with participatory orientations (e.g., engaging partners in peer interviewing, facilitating collective sense-making through talking circles), but they can also be used in ways that are anti-participatory and that preserve researcher-observer and participant-subject hierarchies (e.g., conducting structured interviews that maintain distance between community insiders and outsiders).

Given this methodological variation, entities that lead and influence the field of educational research play important roles in setting expectations for responsible

participatory research. Such entities can highlight the legitimacy, expertise, and authority of communities, instead of imposing narrow definitions of validity shaped by academic institutions and publishers. To further recognize the importance of participatory research, publishers and academic leaders can advocate and hold space for innovative, multimodal, and accessible formats within journals, tenure and promotion processes, and community-university partnerships.

Importantly, critical participatory research, including many of the studies analyzed in this meta-methodology, challenges conventional researcher-participant binaries and relationships by reenvisioning legitimacy both theoretically and methodologically. In nonparticipatory research, there is an assumption that academics are the best-positioned to theorize, validate, and otherwise “legitimize” research applications. Critical participatory research confronts these assumptions by reenvisioning researcher-participant roles and relationships, centering the needs and interests of communities, and recognizing community partners as authorities throughout research theorizing, planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.

This reenvisioning highlights important distinctions between research, critical research, and critical participatory research. Conventional research prioritizes and legitimizes researcher authority over participant authority. While critical scholars may rely upon critical theory to inform their decisions, they often remain the overall research authority. Within critical participatory research, academic researchers, peer reviewers, and publishers are not the sole determiners of legitimacy; community partners are acknowledged in terms of their unique *authority* in terms of both theory *and* method (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Brayboy, 2005; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017; Tachine et al., 2021). Fully honoring the authority of community partners demands “answerability,” or the responsible stewardship of both community-determined knowledge/theories and learning/methodologies throughout the research process (Patel, 2016).

Conclusion: Limitations, Recommendations, and Future Directions

Critical participatory scholars advocate for a space that engages educators, scholars, and learners in work that is simultaneously educative and transformative as a means to transfer theoretical “talk” to methodological “walk” (Caraballo et al., 2017; Tuck & Guishard, 2013; Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020). This meta-methodology sought to answer the question: How does leading educational research braid participatory values discourse (“the talk”) with relational, reciprocal, and responsible methods (“the walk”)? Overall, the synthesis demonstrates that while participatory approaches remain marginalized and under-utilized within high-profile educational research, there are examples of robust studies that “walk the talk” of the relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility necessary for such work to be implemented with integrity. The studies synthesized in this meta-methodology illuminate insights and recommendations for scholars and partners aspiring to engage in participatory work.

Although this study focused on synthesis of participatory research articles, it was not itself participatory. As an interpretive synthesis, it relied upon systematic practices widely accepted within academic circles and upon my limited interpretation, which as an academically trained, white professor from a middle-class background

potentially reinforces the very power structures critical participatory work seeks to dismantle. Ideally, analysis, review, synthesis, and communication would be conducted collaboratively with representative co-researchers from diverse positionalities, across contexts, and via multiple modalities. In the case of a meta-study analyzing academic articles, extensive collaboration is difficult given limited access to articles, time needed to review hundreds of pages of academic text, and diversity of contexts and content. To address this challenge, scholars might host a participatory conference to support partners and academics from across contexts in collaborative review processes.

Scholars also should consider ways to integrate participatory processes and/or values with systematic data analysis methods to advance critical theory-into-practice. In the case of this study, I wove participatory values of relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility with several of van Leeuwen's (2008) categories for CDA (social actors' role allocation, purpose, and legitimacy). Again, while this study was neither participatory nor an example of CDA, the integration of participatory and CDA ideas offers insights to the ways we might apply academic methods to advance critical and participatory theory-in-practice. Integration of these ideas is imperfect and relies on intentional and iterative privileging of critical orientations over mainstream orientations. For example, defining social actors' role allocation through their relationships privileges relationality (something not typically privileged within academia) and privileging community-determined purposes might transform expectations regarding reciprocity.

As this study's overall process was critical and interpretive, it is inherently subjective. Much of the analysis assumed that discursive descriptions of sample article authors were accurate representations of both values and practice. It is possible that authors could have "talked the talk" of participatory work without "walking the talk." Critical and participatory scholars encourage engagement with subjectivity, and I made ongoing efforts to reflect on my positionality, to engage with the positionalities of the authors of the studies, and to identify examples of thick discursive description to enhance trustworthiness. I endeavored to center community expertise (e.g., How do involved communities define reciprocity? How are the article's methods aligning with community-determined interests?). That said, if community interpretations were not represented clearly in the article discourse, they may have been missed during my analysis.

In the spirit of continued collective learning, I offer questions related to insights illuminated through this study. Several of the authors noted disconnects between academic values and participatory practice, especially when scholars face institutional and systemic pressures to use conventional methods, "publish-or-perish," and pre-plan research that is time-bound. How can we enact the flexibility, vulnerability, and humility required by participatory research when we are a part of institutions, systems, and societies that value individual success, academic expertise, and self-promotion? How can we work with partners in academia, industry, and communities to realize *collectively* imagined "possible futures" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016)?

Many of the articles in this meta-methodology were authored by teams of authors from across academic contexts, and 3 of the 26 included community leaders or facilitators as coauthors. Others, including several pieces by solo authors, were written by community insiders who are also academic researchers. However,

only three of the 26 articles explicitly named participants as coauthors. To close the theory/research and practice gaps, and more effectively support the three values framing participatory scholarship, scholars and authors might consider ways to more fully involve participants/co-researchers in coauthoring academic articles and in peer review processes (Stanton et al., 2024). Documentation of collective sense-making activities, participant/co-researcher critique of drafts, and incorporation of multimodal elements are several ways to engage community partners in coauthorship processes. Relatedly, publishers and organizational leaders might dedicate space for participatory work through explicit calls for submissions and asking researchers to clearly recognize partner expertise, co-researcher roles, and coauthorship within scholarly products and processes. Leaders might look to *AERA Open* and *AERJ*, which appear to attract and publish more participatory research, for guidance in terms of encouraging such work.

Change within the field and AERA journals is happening, although it remains slow: In the time between this study's completion (July 2022) and the July 2024 finalization of this article following multiple rounds of review, six additional published articles likely would have qualified for inclusion in the sample (Baldridge et al., 2024; Conrad & Hardison-Stevens, 2024; Cutuli et al., 2024; Machado et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2024; Wessel-Powell et al., 2023). In thinking about our next directions, what can we do today and tomorrow to further "the walk" of participatory research? How might we better demonstrate participatory practice, with transparency and specificity, across contexts and methodologies? How might we facilitate collective sense-making activities with community and youth? How can we responsibly engage participants in data collection, co-analysis, and co-interpretation? How can we support coauthorship, co-review, and other forms of collaborative dissemination? How might we expand access to results through open-source publishing, community presentations, and multimodal formats? How can we recognize and compensate emotional and professional labor of participants throughout research projects?

Despite the field of education's focus on service to communities and children, educational researchers have been criticized for using tools, approaches, and beliefs that are deficit-laden, othering, elitist, and disconnected from lived experiences and future-oriented desires of stakeholders. How can we enact participatory work to better honor local knowledges, theories, and methodologies? How might we reposition students, teachers, community members, and other participants to value their expertise? How might reviews of research enact relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility in terms of doing research *with* partners? What collective futures become possible with *critical and transformative* participatory research?

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