**Establishing Child Centred Practice in a changing world**

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**Turning up the volume - practices positioning children in everyday settings'**

**Title:**

***Towards an informed, participative and sustainable approach to children’s fashion and clothing: IN2FROCC in action.***

**Abstract**

As a significant part of childhood material culture, children's clothes contribute to shaping their social identity and gender, as well as to developing and supporting their interactions with their environment related to their age. The focus on children's education and well-being is essential. Their voices should be emphasised in the interest of promoting an inclusive future in both research on children’s material culture and in practice. However, despite the daily nature of children’s interaction with clothing, their relationship with clothes is ignored and methods to support an analysis of it are lacking. An investigation of children’s clothing behaviour is needed to better understand children's agency, to influence industry experts and to encourage policy makers to engage more sustainably with children’s fashion. IN2FROCC (Interdisciplinary and International Network for Research on Children and Clothing) is comprised of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists, museum curators, childhood practitioners, designers, industry representatives and children united in an investigation into children's clothes around the globe, historically and in social ecosystems. This network seeks to engage in an innovative, inclusive and organic manner with current research on children’s dress codes, fashion and clothes to establish a deeper understanding of children’s clothing interactions. This chapter will present the initial reflections and actions of this network, creating impactful methods for participative children’s clothing culture and design.

Key words:

Clothing, participative design, learning process, heritage, material culture.

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**Introduction**

”We need to act as if we are to build a society in which individuals and communities have greater control over the loose parts with which their environment may be constructed” (Nicholson 1971:34).

As COP26 is coming to an end, we have seen children marching in the streets of Glasgow (Scotland), to demand respect for their planet and their lives. Together, they demonstrate their awareness of the need for a more sustainable world to secure their future, they call for a world where they have a say and they turn up the volume to make their voices heard. They also declare their willingness to take part in a world where they are not only considered as passive future adults, but fully empowered to participate in the decision making regarding their environment and the design of their planet. In this debate, the dichotomic role of industry is pointed out: a damaging force as well as one which may offer opportunities to brighten our future. The fashion industry has been trying to identify avenues to mitigate their own impact on the environment and offer new opportunities that can change consumer behaviour. What has this to do with children? Indeed, if the culture of childhood (Delalande, Arleo 2011) relates to the creation of a safer and greener planet, it also relies on the conception of a more sustainable material environment: this implies the creation of toys, books, games, furniture, and ultimately, clothing. Shaping children’s identity, dressing up their stories, adding functionality to their activities, shaping their development and stimulating their senses, clothes are an integral part of children’s lives. However, despite the current emphasis on children’s participative environmental actions, when the focus on children's education and well-being has never been so essential, children’s views on fashion and clothing remain marginal. Despite its formative impact, their relationship with clothes is overlooked or is seen only from the perspective of adults. The design of their clothes and the construction of their fashion heritage remains mostly unclaimed and in the hands of the adults who direct the conception of childhood material culture.

The network IN2FROCC (Interdisciplinary and International Network for Research on Children and Clothing) was created in January 2021 as a response to this status quo. This group gathers historians, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists, museum curators, childhood practitioners, designers, industry representatives and children, in an investigation into children's clothes across places, times and social ecosystems. This network seeks to redefine current research on children’s fashion, reorienting children’s clothing culture to consider the perspective of children and to provide solutions towards a participative role for children. After outlining current research in childhood and clothing from educational, sociological, design and industry perspectives, and presenting case studies exploring participative fashion design with children, this chapter will present the initial reflections and actions of this new network whose aim is creating impactful methods for participative children’s clothing culture and design. The opportunities that children’s clothes present to establish the child centred practices which are the core of IN2FROCC’s action will thus be established in this chapter.

1. Childhood, children and clothing: state of the art

1.1 From fashion theory to childhood studies: the orphan child

For a topic so fundamental to establishing an individual’s gender, social identity, agency, behaviour and physiological development, children’s clothing has been unevenly studied. Cook (2004) gives a masterly introduction to the field, reviewing the key texts and identifying problems and gaps. One of the difficulties of the field is the lack of a critical methodology for analysing varied types of sources, and using them to illuminate contemporary practices. Le Guennec (2018) uses anthropological methods, and Rose (2013) a historical framework, to underpin discussions of children’s clothing and parental consumption. Another problem is the current focus on Anglo-American studies, although there is interesting work emerging from Japan, China and Eastern Europe (Kinsella 2002; McVeigh 2005; Roman 2016; Le Guennec and Janning 2020).

Histories of children’s clothes emerged from studies of surviving garments; Rose (1989), Join-Diéterle & Tétart-Vittu (2001), Le Guennec (2018) and Marshall (2008) all worked as museum professionals, influenced by the pioneering work of the curators Cunnington (1965) and Buck (1996). The reliance on surviving garments can be problematic, as it tends to prioritize middle- and upper-class practices, and the “special” (and atypical) rather than the everyday. Brooks (1999) and Richmond (2009) have analysed items with known wearers in their specific social contexts. Rose (2014) used a historic outfit from a known retailer to investigate manufacturing and retailing practices. A more design-focussed approach was taken by Canales (2018) and by the series of exhibition catalogues *Small* *Couture* published by the Textile and Fashion Museum in Cholet (France) between 2005 and 2019.

1.3 Gender studies: a necessary trend

Discussion of the historical production of gender through dress is an expanding area, but one that often starts at adolescence, leaving childhood unexamined. Conversely, recent sociological studies of children’s self-fashioning through clothing show little awareness of the historic specificity of current practices. This is especially noticeable in the discussion of color coding in Ruble et al. (2008). This omission highlights the importance of work by Paoletti which traces developments from the 19th Century to the 21st (1983, 1989, and 1997) and integrates sociological and pediatric sources into discussions of consumption (2012, 2015). The cultural specificity of gender coding is addressed by Nixdorff and Muller (1983). Cook (2004), on early-20th-century America, is important as an examination of the involvement of commerce in gender coding; Rose (2010) dates this back to 19th-century Britain.

Gender construction and body image amongst pre-teenagers in contemporary society is the main concern of Julien (2020), Diasio and Vinel (2017). The role of the press in the representation of girls at the beginning of the 20th century, as researched by Guillier (2022), provides further avenues of historical reflection (Vaclavlik 2014). Contemporary case studies based on analysis of garments (Pollen 2011), on promotional strategies (Buckley 1996) or interviews with focus groups (Pollen 2011; Ruble, et al. 2008) provide snapshots of practices in particular times and places. Le Guennec et al (2013) is a wider-ranging study of the use of textile patterns as gender markers. Many more investigations are needed to establish how practices are developing and how they relate to issues of modesty and age-codes. Cook and Kaiser (2004) is a model that might be more widely adopted, an interdisciplinary study that uses both historical and contemporary sources.

1.4 Childrenswear: the role of the industry

Current research on children’s fashion is informed by key issues in consumption. Investigations by Ritch (2016; 2018) illuminate interactions between the child, parents and carers and the clothing industry. The potential of emotional design to mitigate over-consumption is addressed by Lange (2018). Le Guennec (2021) considers how children’s participation in the design and making of their own clothes could reinforce children’s agency as users of material culture. Finally, Miles (2020) investigates how clothing industry initiatives dating back to the 1970’s could inform current practices.

There are currently several initiatives (mostly located in Northern Europe) that focus on children’s creativity and give a voice to children as dynamic stakeholders in the construction of our society. Notable are the online museum created by the children’s illustrator Claude Ponti; the Swedish child drawing archive[[1]](#footnote-2); the Norwegian International Museum of Children's Art; and the project of children’s cultural heritage developed by Professor Anna Sparrman at Linköping University. Expanding these initiatives to children’s clothing creations seems a natural pathway to extend research on the material culture of childhood.

1.5 Children as co-creators: the unknown world

Children’s clothing behaviour is a subject of studies in sociology and anthropology. Although not specifically on children’s interactions with their clothes, Delalande and Arleo (2011) have modelled the existence of a culture of childhood based on playground interactions and games. Le Guennec (2020) has provided a retrospective insight into children’s appropriation and manipulation of clothing, mostly based on the study of museum material informed by family and fashion archives. Since fashion shapes individual identities (Balut 2013), dress codes are both a medium for children to build a sense of belonging to peer groups, and also a way to immerse themselves in their own imaginative world. Thus, researching children’s fashion is a way to meet the inner individuality of the child, if we can avoid relying solely on an adult’s view, and explore alternative resources to analyse children’s clothing agency.

Unfortunately, reflection on children as co-creators suffers from the lack of consideration of craft as an educational and socialising tool. Conversely, clothing worn in educational settings has been much studied as a site of tensions between the desire for individuality in dress and the requirements of the group, notably by Proctor (2002); Gereluk (2008); Copeland et al. (2009); Rose (2011). This is currently being addressed in the research undertaken at the National Museum of Education (Rouen, France) (Le Guennec, Coutant, 2019) underpinning the project *Dressed for School*. Le Guennec and Coutant (2019) developed a series of participative design projects on the school outfits of French children aged 6-8, involving the fashion industry and design practitioners. In September 2020, the childrenswear company *Jacadi* (ID.Kids) produced a design brief for students on the BA Hons Product Design (Diplôme Supérieur d’Arts Appliqués) of the French Design School Olivier de Serre (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d’Arts), Paris. This invited students to design a uniform for nursery and primary school pupils, taking into account the necessary functions of pupils’ clothes, children’s views on their school clothes, and the potential for these uniforms to support their learning. This practice-based research intertwined with anthropological methods, including the active observation of children in their school environment, and was broken down into three phases. Firstly, the students were introduced to an anthropological analysis of children’s clothes (Le Guennec, 2018), which emphasised the role of clothes as tools for learning and socialising as well as creativity. This theoretical support was completed by an introduction to anthropological work with children and the cutting-edge work of Delalande and Arleo (2011). Secondly, in order to create commercially viable products, the students analysed the role of the child as a co-consumer (Cook, 2004) and the constraints of the children’s market. Finally, they evaluated their products, considering the requirements of the childrenswear industry, the results of prototype testing by children, and their own experience as school pupils (using the concept of emotional design from Norman (2003)). Their prototypes were also assessed by fashion industry partners invited by Heriot-Watt University.

Of the fifteen prototypes designed by this group of students, most reflect current challenges for children in their everyday life and at school. Outdoor learning, mobility, adapting to activities and to the weather, getting changed, academic learning and creative learning have been identified as the main points in the development of school overalls and outdoor clothes. The functionality of garments was explored through the sourcing of sustainable and durable materials, and the design of clothes adapted to the physical and physiological abilities of children who have to self-dress. This project has led to very impactful and innovative examples of gender neutral clothes that are adapted to pupil’s lives, take into account children’s views, and include daily learning through play activities[[2]](#footnote-3) (Figures 1 and 2).

**:INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE:**

**:INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE:**

1.6 Clothing as an educational tool

However, research on children’s clothes needs to span beyond the school context, for clothing to demonstrate its ability to act as an educational support for a socialising and physiologically growing child. Based on Quentel’s concept of the “historical embedding” of the child (1997), Le Guennec (2018) proposes a comprehensive modelling of children’s clothing as educational tools. However, the adult focus of this framework creates the necessity to identify the direct interactions between the child and her clothes, which remains a field of exploration (Le Guennec 2020). In this perspective, the work of Gudiksen and Skovbjerg (2020) on play design underlines the importance of children’s direct interactions as a way of engaging with the world and expressing their agency (Qvortrup 2005, Prout 2005). Thus craft pedagogy (Crafts Council 2019) could inspire innovative tools for the development of children’s creativity and physiological development (Parker 2021).

The recent exhibition curated by Canales (2018) – “Century of the Child: Nordic Design for Children 1900 to Today” (V&A Museum of Childhood 2018) – demonstrates the need for a comprehensive approach towards children’s material culture in order to delineate the specificity, role and impact of youth design. Canales (2018) highlights the purpose of the exhibition taking its title from the ground-breaking book, *The Century of the Child* by Swedish social theorist, Ellen Key, first published in 1900. Despite its Northern focus, this curatorial project demonstrates the importance of the contribution of contemporary practitioners in a reflexion on children’s clothing which might lead the way to an “unsiloed” approach to the topic.

1.7 Listening to children’s voices

The adult focus on children’s fashion is biased by the resources recording childhood culture of the past, mostly coming from wealthy classes, and from Western and Northern Europe. In the quest for a better understanding of the creative power of childhood and a reflection on the place of children in society, the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Convention of the Right of the Child emphasises the importance of children’s voices. The Constitution not only underlines the child’s fundamental rights to play, education and safety, but also insists on consultation with children on any matters related to their lives (art. 12). Berkley and Lister (2020) echo this statement and extend their reflection to the role of adults in actively listening to children. However, we still need to identify the methodology which will allow children’s voices to be heard and taken into consideration, while respecting their legal status as vulnerable individuals, and the limits of their ability to communicate their views. This is probably why, as mentioned by Einarsdottir (2014) research **on** children has taken the lead over doing more research **with** children. Direct access to the understanding of children’s use of their clothes is jeopardised by ‘silo-ing’, with practice-based research overlooked and children’s considerations ignored. Thus, a renewed, cross-disciplinary approach could re-establish the position of the child at the heart of the research process on the most common and most sophisticated, most personal and most social object of her daily life: her clothing.

1. **IN2FROCC (International and interdisciplinary network on Children and Clothing): placing children at the heart of the research process**

IN2FROCC was born during the COVID-19 pandemic, at the invitation of the International Research Group ACORSO (Apparences, corps et sociétés/ Appearances, Bodies and Societies, University of Rennes 2, France). This opportunity occurred during an unprecedented time, where adults, practitioners, educators, researchers and policy makers, were “stuck at home” and for some, interleaving their professional activity with their family duties. Children have never been as central in our communities, their education and their daily life have never been as collaborative. Fashion magazines like *Vogue* (2020) opened their pages for children to inspire their readers via their spontaneous drawings. Fashion brands, such as *Catimini*, invited children to collaborate more broadly in their collections (Zarini 2013). And, as mentioned earlier, the heritage industry started to raise the possibility of a childhood heritage taking into account children’s productions and views. This context reinforced the need to research children’s clothing from the perspectives of heritage practice and fashion history.

It appeared that the marginalization of children’s clothing collections in museums echoed the lack of opportunities for researchers and practitioners working on children’s material culture to connect and cross-fertilise in cross-disciplinary forums and interdisciplinary research projects. While exploring the opportunities of a post-disciplinary approach, it was obvious that research within disciplinary boundaries prevented a comprehensive and necessary overview due to the multi-faceted nature of children’s clothing. From these initial discussions appeared the need for a forum for developing innovative and inclusive approaches to children’s material culture, which would offer a welcoming framework for pilot experiments across disciplines, and put children’s participation at the core of reflexion on their environment, past and future.

The selection of participants to the network started with the goal of avoiding traditional avenues and ensuring a strong international perspective on the interactions between children and clothing, drawing on pioneering disciplines and research fields. The network currently gathers together twenty-six participants from across the globe (Europe, Northern Africa, the Middle East, U.S.A., Brazil, New Zealand and Australia, China). The participants bring specific interests in children’s material culture, childhood studies, the heritage of childhood, fashion history, practice-based design and children’s education. The importance of decolonialising the approach to children’s material culture is reflected in the invitation sent to researchers and practitioners in non-English speaking countries, regularly overlooked in childhood studies, to take a leading part in our activities (Eastern and Southern Europe, South America, Middle East, Asia). Defining its aims, the IN2FROCC network emphasised its ambition to engage in an innovative, inclusive and organic manner with current research on children’s clothes to establish children’s agency with respect to clothing and fashion and to promote the role of children in the design of their own material culture.

From the beginning of IN2FROCC’s programme, it has been extremely important to investigate the work of design practitioners working with children and focusing on their approach to clothes, to influence new creative processes. We have been particularly inspired by the work of Anne-Charlotte Hartmann-Bragard (Studio Abi), Laetitia Barbu (Illustrious Lab / Arkellia Design) and Maija Nygren (Almaborealis, Puzzleware), who, in different ways, work from the perspective of the growing child to innovate fashion and clothing and to address some of the gaps identified in the field. Echoing the inter-generational nature of the kits created by the company Clothkits in the 1970’s (Miles, 2020), these experimentations highlight the emotional impact of clothes as objects linking the adult with the child, the past with the future, and connecting children with their own history – this is ultimately the socialising role of fashion. In placing children at the heart of the creative process, these pioneering experiments are contributing to the conception of participative tool-boxes allowing designers to take into account children’s clothing agency and to understand what clothes mean for them. In an ever-changing world, where sustainability and inclusion are key facets in a preferred future, these experiences could provide the norm for children’s education and for the fashion industry.

**2.1. Establishing child centred approach and co-creation in clothing from innovative practice-based approaches**

* + 1. Studio Abi

Based in France, since March 2020 Studio Abi has offered workshops, publications and events that are both fun and creative, which develop children's self-confidence, foster their creativity and enhance their imagination. By exploring the magical dimension of fabrics, and through a pedagogy of clothing and the game of dressing, Studio Abi fights conformism. A new exploration of the world of fashion is proposed, via innovative problem solving experiments aiming towards the education to ecology and upcycling of younger generations. The exploration and study of clothes, from the origins of their raw material to their function, leads to reflections on the “power” of clothes: the power of keeping us warm, of protecting us from the cold or from harm; the power of making us stand apart or of making us invisible; the power of expressing identities or states of mind. It also emphasises the potential to travel in time, in space, and across cultures through garments.

Studio Abi is driven by one thing: providing pre-school and school children with a safe space that brings them together, that is tailored to their needs and desires, and which can itself transform and evolve in response to their development, their reflections, and their discoveries. To this end, Studio Abi takes steps to avoid thinking on behalf of the child, even when adults want to do their best to assist children, or when their creations do not meet the expectations or tastes of the adult prior to the workshop. “We are not afraid of silences or of moments of boredom. We are not afraid of facing our own anxieties—as parents; as ones that continuously look for validations from traditional educational system; as ones that continuously want to have answers. On the contrary, we seek out every response from children themselves.” Studio Abi is the result of a continuous process of co-designing with children. This process allows them to reflect on fashion and clothing, dress codes and design. It also requires adults to be available to observe, listen, adapt and above all, to let go of the traditional models of education and hierarchy.

The idea of working on the “clothes of the future” with a classroom of children aged six, came spontaneously, when they were asked to collectively brainstorm about the concept of utopia. At the beginning, their teacher encouraged them to imagine a space to dream in (Figures 3, 4 and 5). To echo the architect Adolf Loos (2014) and through collective thinking with the children involved in these workshops, clothes were then introduced as the first protection of the body and complementary to the habitat. From this initial reflection, children were invited to think about “the clothes of the future”, following their dreams, desires, and functional understanding.

-        “Which clothes for a better life?”

-        “How to dress ourselves to feel free?”

-        “What is the utility of clothes?”

These questions were formulated by children to imagine new and altered functions of clothes, to augment clothes, and to question everyday behaviour that had been repeated unconsciously: ie. the act of buying a garment for one use instead of making one that would have multiple functions as a coat / tent, a scarf /blanket, etc.

**:INSERT FIGURES 3, 4, 5 AROUND HERE:**

During these workshops, children have envisaged a future which is an accessible and promising tomorrow. They construct it by manipulating materials, by daring to tinker, by learning ways to make their own inventions and to share them with their classmates. Their creations are always pragmatic, joining an aesthetic ideal and an ecological awareness. For example, their imagined clothes that can clean themselves to save water; a t-shirt that is also a piece of art, or a garment that can heal wounds like a bandage. For children, the garment of the future is always imagined as a way to respond to multiple needs. It adapts and metamorphoses to improve their lives and support their creativity—like a pair of pants which we are able to draw on, a scarf with which we can jump rope, and a shirt that can be worn inside out.

Sharing with children can be disturbing because they take us – adults – back to our forgotten ideas. Ideas that we have pushed aside as we judged them too wacky or, on the contrary, too “ordinary” to be retained or further explored. Finally, when we think that we are able to open the realm of possibilities to children and show them the “way”, it is them that open our eyes and transform our relationship with the world, and thereby with fashion.

* + 1. Illustrious North / Arkellia Design

Through Illustrious Lab – Illustrious North, since 2018, Arkellia Design has been coordinating several projects directly connected to childhood and children aged 3-12 in Nordic countries. Addressing changes in the position of the child in society over the last decades, Illustrious North questions creative education and the place of digital communications in children’s life. Adopting a methodology based on Design Driven Innovation (Verganti, 2009), Illustrious North investigates new meanings through design and reflects on these evolutions to draw new visions over products and services for children, with considerations for their rights.

One of their research projects addresses the educational potential of clothing, as support for learning contents on sustainable fashion. This is explored in immersive experiments via augmented design – *Wear-Abouts* (Figures 6, 7, 8); *Secret Garden* (workshops with children during the 2019 Helsinki Children’s Design Week); and *Biocolour* presentations (in the context of the exhibition of the University of Helsinki) (Figure 9). Children are also invited to reflect on their heritage and social identity: *By me* a project where “Children dress up Nordic creatures”, invites them to reimagine their clothes via storytelling techniques based on their Nordic heritage [figure 10].

**:INSERT FIGURE 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 AROUND HERE:**

As future consumers, children have the right to know about their clothes, how they’re made and the potential effects of materials and processes used in fashion on wearers, on makers and on the environment. The creative potential of fashion is emphasized in projects looking to actively engage children with the environmental impact of this industry. With this in mind, the co-creation of prints is another aspect of the work of Illustrious North. Workshops and collaborations with illustrators aim to co-create pattern designs taking into account child-specific issues. The designs are underpinned by questions such as: what do children think about colours, figurative or abstract shapes; should colors be gender neutral; could we educate children’s eyes to a palette using natural dyes?

While co-creating with children is a challenging process, Illustrious North explores several ways for children to participate throughout the creative phase and provide first hand feedback to the designers. One of the most important points is to have a deep and well theorized understanding of the way children’s apprehension of the world depends on their age, needs and physiological requirements. This is possible thanks to a pluri-disciplinary approach embedded in Illustrious-North programme. While children learn and enjoy a creative time during these workshops, the researchers are able to monitor how children react to the different tasks or materials presented to them. They observe how they handle fabric and wool; how they recreate garments pushing their confidence beyond the limits; how they engage with the creations that the fashion industry has produced to dress them. This contributes to the evaluation of children’s interpretation of fashion and clothing, to, ultimately, influence childrenswear designers.

Furthermore, building from the exploration of digital technology as ways to engage children with fashion education, a reflection on ethics in child centered research has led towards further consideration for data protection. Children’s cyber safety is currently subject to further evaluation in projects merging fashion with virtual reality. This prospect is at the core of the ongoing project *Wear-Abouts*, which brings story-telling and educative principles to children through clothing via embarked technology. Story-telling is brought through the illustrated patterns printed on fabric and created by illustrators. Additional content is displayed through the use of augmented reality as a virtual layer on top of the printed illustrations. In a series of workshops organised during the 2019 Helsinki Children’s Design Week, involving school children aged 6 to 8 years old and a wider audience (babies to teenagers), patterns recognition was introduced, as well as drawing on fabric, on old clothes and accessories. This rather unorthodox way to play with clothes was often a first experience for these children as this is most of the time banned by parents. The theme of “*Secret Garden”*, was available for inspiration through with Nordic illustrated books on the topic of the garden. Children were also introduced to pattern making techniques by a Finnish professional illustrator and pattern designer. To pursue this exploration of innovative fabrics, and prints, children were invited to reveal the invisible motifs of a cloth while drawing on it. This technique, mimicking in a simple and non-digital way the principle of augmented reality, lead towards the idea of ludic interaction and hidden secret content to be revealed in a playful way. Several children have tested the *Wear-Abouts* prototypes beyond these workshops. Our aim was to collect children’s opinions on the drawn patterns as well as observing how children manipulate devices in relation with the garment they wear, and their understanding of the process for displaying augmented content. The tests with the *Wear-abouts* prototypes revealed the interest of children in the aesthetic of the patterns (how they would like to wear it, how they found it). It is either the cuteness of some animals or the interest in unidentified elements that caught their attention. They were highly interested in revealing the hidden content on the fabric and learn how to reveal it with a smart device. All children, from 4 years old, knew perfectly well how to use the device and the AR app and we only had to help them focus the device to reveal the AR content, which they really enjoyed unveiling.

The conclusions of these experiments were that children are not accustomed to draw on fabric, either because it is something that is not allowed by adults, or because it is not a material usually presented to them as something to draw on it. However, we found that they were mostly interested to experiment the sensation of drawing on this unusual material, as well as the way the fabric would react to the use of colorful markers. Some of them extended the opportunity given to them by adding their own messages, symbols or own drawings. Another interesting result identified in the Finnish school, was the way children were specifically left free during the creative process, once the instruction had been given by the teacher, which is an excellent illustration of ways to foster children’s agency in the context of a creative work.

Establishing co-design with children, this series of projects not only questions children’s approach towards unusual ways to create clothes, but also echoes Studio Abi in the exploration of the magical power of clothes. Furthermore, it provides the opportunity to analyse children’s approach towards smart technologies and augmented realities, while leading practitioners to reflect on the ethical constraints of using these of technologies with vulnerable individuals.

* + 1. *Puzzleware:* towards participative childrenswear

The project *Puzzleware* (previously *Convertible*s) by *Almaborealis design studio* (Maija Nygren) was born in 2019, in Scotland, through a combination of factors. As a practicing knitwear design studio, the aim is to generate knitted garments into this world but the thought of this didn’t sit right with the founder. During her time as a student, various realisations of the pressing challenges of the current manufacturing methods of goods emerged, and the following became the triggers for the work of *Almaborealis* today:

Firstly, what is very ‘topsy turvy’, is the negative impact that the clothing designed for, and worn by, children has on the environment in the later life of those very children. Secondly: the lack of quality craft education in British schools (Crafts Council, 2019), reinforced by the realisation that the founder’s 8-year old had not made a single stitch during their time at school. Finally: the domination of fast fashion, which was once said to be a tool for democracy (Bick, R., Halsey, E. & Ekenga, C.C. 2018) but which has led to a denial of knowledge by distancing children, and ultimately wearers, from clothes making opportunities.

Clothing is a puzzle that is engineered into shapes that cover the human body, usually knitted or stitched together with a needle and yarn. Undoubtedly, every clothing designer has experienced joy when making a garment or collection. Although a specialised know-how, the knowledge of clothes making is core in human societies, but has been through a disconnect from the users related to the globalisation of this worldwide industry (Adamson, 2018). This estranges entire generations from a vital understanding of where our clothes, acting as human second skins, come from; what they are made of; and by whom. By introducing future generations to the knowledge of their own material environment, we democratise and include their voices in the shaping of it.

*Puzzleware* (Figures 11 and 12) responds to the aforementioned challenges by offering opportunities through workshops and a commercial product range, for children (4-12 years) to gain an understanding of clothing, and the technical skills involved in their make. By stitching together a combination of knitted panels into a formation of their choice, by engaging in free play with guidance, children explore and express themselves through clothing. *Puzzleware* comes in a kit form including a wooden needle, wool yarn and guided instructions to master four basic hand stitching techniques, all that is required to assemble a wearable puzzle. Highlighting the importance of this education to co-creation in fashion, the concept was shortlisted for the Dezeen Awards Wearable Category in 2021.

**:INSERT FIGURES 11 and 12 AROUND HERE:**

Puzzleware emphasises the necessity for children to bond emotionally with their clothes through the acquisition of craft skills and the know-how of clothes making. Ultimately, involving children in this clothing education is a way to prepare the users of tomorrow towards a more sustainable consumption and approach to the fashion industry. The creativity, focus and satisfaction expressed by children during the Puzzleware workshops, not only demonstrates the benefits of this approach, but proves the importance for clothes wearers to take part in a co-creative process as early as possible in life to shift the perspective on clothing creation and consumption.

**2.1.4 An Exploration of Children’s Understanding of Luxury: Use of Visual Collages**

Finally, the study developed by Dr Yasmin K. Sekhon Dhillon has been particularly insightful for investigating children’s perception and visual understanding of luxury and luxury brands, and applying this to the context of fashion. It also provided further methodological innovations in generating, gathering and recording children’s interpretation of the fashion environment. The main aim of the research was to explore what luxury meant to children and what influenced their understanding of luxury, their own individual views or those projected by luxury brands. Children’s appreciation of luxury, ranging from its personal meaning to its design and aesthetic value were central to the study. With the focus on the younger consumer the methodological choice was of particular importance. This research adopted an interpretive framework as its primary focus was to understand what children consider luxury to be as well as how they visualize luxury. This study used the narrative mode of perceiving and thinking, focusing on how individuals construct their own “realities” based on common cultural narratives and symbols. Reality is arguably “intersubjective” through the children’s social interactions, rather than a mere objective reality.

According to Roedder-John (1999), eleven to sixteen years is the reflective stage of development, when the child gains a level of independence in decision-making, this became the sample age range for this study. The participants in this study were UK based and attended secondary school. All the data collection took place on school premises, which ensured that participants were in familiar surroundings.

The importance of engaging with children and ensuring they could express themselves was a key consideration, and visual collages were accordingly used as a means of data collection. Collages are a useful way of engaging participants and allowing them to express their thoughts in a creative manner. The use of visual collages in this study allowed children to participate in research that facilitated creative thinking, enabling them to express their thoughts, feelings and choices in a way that goes beyond traditional qualitative research techniques. Children were able to express their ideas in a non-verbal way, however many also chose to add words, sentences, and drawings to their “luxury” collages. Interestingly most of the children used a combination of methods, from cutting out images, to describing the images as well as expressing themselves through drawing (Figure 13). The use of this visual methodology allowed the researchers to explore how children categorize, express, and understand luxury and luxury brands as well as aiding children to express thoughts, feelings and ideas of luxury in an imaginative manner. Children were together when completing their visual collages (Einarsdóttir, 2007). The opportunity to develop visual collages was perceived by the participants as a “fun” activity that allowed them to relax and reflect on the concept and reality of luxury in their lives.

**:INSERT FIGURE 13 AROUND HERE:**

Overall children were left to express themselves as they wished, however, to ensure children were fully aware of what the visual collage activity involved the researcher had an informal conversation with each class and ensured there was support from the teacher and researcher throughout the activity. Materials were provided to develop the collages, including coloured card, scissors, glue and stimulus magazine material. A range of magazines were provided, from fashion and lifestyle to news and hobby publications, giving participants a varied choice of images and text to choose from. They were given a sheet of coloured card on which to develop their collage. Participants were told that they could develop their collages in whatever way they wished to so long as their individual visual collage related to what they believed luxury to be and how they wished to visualize luxury. Giving children the choice to write, draw, cut and paste and use words meant they felt comfortable, and many were keen to start developing their collage, taking pride in its development. In addition, the visual collage then became a starting point for discussion in the focus groups (which were undertaken after the collage development and complimented the methodological tools for this study).

1. **To create new methodologies for research into childhood heritage and material culture**

The inaugural workshop of IN2FROCC was held online with a community of thirty-four researchers at various stages in their careers and from a variety of backgrounds, meeting virtually for the first time. After the initially exciting prospect of identifying researchers sharing similar research interests in children and clothing, the group started to work on the analysis of anonymous photographs of children shared on a creative workshop platform. This discussion, based on the author’s expertise and experiments on the topic of children’s fashion (Le Guennec 2021), was framed as a way to evidence mutual benefits and cross-fertilisation between disciplines. The variety of approaches between practitioners, historians, anthropologists and sociologists in the meaningful interpretation of these de-contextualised photographs, only underlined the usual bias when analysing the archives of childhood: a nostalgic reference to one’s own childhood, adult focus and discipline-led approach were common to all participants. The evaluation of this initial workshop emphasised the need for new methods and a strong framework to explore the relationships between children and their clothes.

* 1. **Object of the month: advancing participative knowledge on children’s fashion heritage**

IN2FROCC started this methodological reflection with a series of online activities focusing on garments past and present, in a variety of representations from the object itself to a photograph. This started with the analysis of a 19th century outfit (private collection) (Figures 14 and 15), following the methods compiled by Kim and Mida in *The Dress Detective* (2015). This analysis of a garment, from observation to interpretation, emphasised an adult focus on children’s heritage and the necessity to adapt this framework and include children’s views on items worn by their peers. This initial event was followed by the analysis of a photograph of a uniformed Pioneer (the Bulgarian Communist youth group) taken in 1978, commented on by the subject (Figure 16). This piece opened the boundaries of our programme and highlighted the necessity of adopting an inclusive approach to children’s clothes, contextualised, but “de-westernised”.

**:INSERT FIGURE 14 and 15 AROUND HERE:**

**:INSERT FIGURE 16 AROUND HERE:**

Ultimately, inviting children to the workshop was made possible thanks to the contribution of Studio Abi. The analysis of an outfit created by a child during a workshop on the “Fashion of the Future” previously discussed (Figure 17), demonstrated the significance of children’s creations which go beyond the pre-conceptions of adults to produce pieces expressing their imaginations. The testimonials of the children presenting their creation emphasised the importance of providing opportunities for children’s voices and interpretations to be captured. The activity of the network will therefore progress towards the construction of consultative tools. This may benefit the museums sector, as they look for children’s engagement in the creation of their heritage and fashion history[[3]](#footnote-4).

**:INSERT FIGURE 17 AROUND HERE:**

* 1. **Ethics and participation: Designing for Children’s Rights**

As ethical considerations are crucial in the analysis of children as users and potential co-creators of their clothes, and also in children’s interpretation of their clothing environment, IN2FROCC has recently joined the network Designing for Children’s Rights (D4CR). Designing for Children’s Rights is a global non-profit association, supporting the [*Designing for Children’s Rights Guide*](https://childrensdesignguide.org) that integrates children’s rights in the design, business and development of products and services around the world[[4]](#footnote-5).

Aiming to create a design toolbox for designers, policy makers, childhood practitioners, educators and children, and thus aligned with the objectives of IN2FROCC, D4CR has prioritised considerations of ethics and data protection in any creative projects involving children. Thanks to its heuristic and participant-led methods, D4CR supports projects for and with children, aiming to address the UNCRC rights of the child through the design of their material environment. Working from the participative production of local chapters, D4CR will provide the framework needed for IN2FROCC to develop their own experimental labs in Scotland and in France, where hybrid experiments between digital design and child centred fashion practice will incubate and be delivered.

**Conclusion**

IN2FROCC is very much a research project in progress. Exploring ways to include children in the analysis of their material world; advocating for a collaborative and post-disciplinary approach of children’s material culture; strengthening research methods and framing participative research; contribute to the current aims to provide a voice to unheard or marginalized communities. Articulating these considerations with the need to innovate and to promote the significance of research in children’s fashion, is possible thanks to a shift of perspective and a delocalised – but not decontextualised – approach across all levels of society. The heuristic cross-fertilisation gained by reflexion across disciplines where theory is fed by practice-based research and commercial development contribute to our different perspective on children’s material culture. Due to the social nature of fashion and clothing, dress culture appears as the ideal companion to explore children’s engagement with the world. This unexplored field, challenged by the discussion around sustainability, echoes the emerging reflexion on children’s participation in society. The investigation of children’s interactions with clothing is key to reaching a better understanding of children’s behaviour, to influence the industry and education and to encourage policy makers to engage more sustainably with children’s fashion. It is equally crucial to query the scientific paradigm on children’s environments and to engage with alternative methods placing children at the heart of the research process. Finally, establishing child centred practice in fashion design contributes to children’s inclusion in their own material culture.

The appropriation of clothes usually made and selected for them by adults, relies on their creative and imaginative interpretation of objects. The functional and emotional appropriation of their clothes is key in the education of future consumers, and creates the grounding for a sustainable approach to fashion. As highlighted in the case studies presented in this paper, children’s active participation in this design process is needed to build a stronger clothing awareness amongst them. In the current social and environmental contexts, it is also needed to unlock the educational power of clothes and the potential for a more innovative approach to this overlooked industry. Thus, addressing the current gap in childhood, fashion and heritage studies as well as re-establishing children’s practice as a deep and significant resource for the understanding of children’s agency, remains the priorities of IN2FROCC’s ambitious agenda. Ultimately, IN2FROCC’s reflexion in action conveys these questions: how can a pluri-disciplinary approach to children’s material culture, generate appropriate research methods to ensure children’s active participation in a safer, more sustainable, and more inclusive world? To be continued…

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Fig. 13 - Sekhon Dhillon, Y. R., & Roberts, J. (2020). [An exploration of children’s understanding of luxury: a visual approach](https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/cgi/eprintbypureuuid?uuid=48f083d7-2160-4a26-bdd6-2fab657e40eb). Luxury: History, Culture, Consumption, 6(1), 39-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20511817.2019.1752532>, example of a visual collage.

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Fig. 17 - The creation of a child during the workshop “Fashion of the future”, Paris, 2021, Studio Abi.

1. Svenskt barnbildarkiv – Om oss – Eskilstuna kommun [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See a selection of students projects in this interviews: <https://youtu.be/VgxIitkILmw> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The “Object of the month” was held online via a secured Facebook group on 15th July, 13rd October and 17th November and was open to the members of the group. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/in2frocc> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “D4CR works to create awareness about the importance of keeping children’s rights in mind when building products and services. Apps, content, services and physical products are all under this umbrella. D4CR works to develop the Designing for Children’s Rights Guide, which instead of pointing out what is wrong, guides how to do things right.”

<http://designingforchildrensrights.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)