

## **Prioritising children's participation in research: including children's voices in updating a national early learning framework**

### Author

Barblett, Lennie, Cartmel, Jennifer, Lavina, Leanne, Hadley, Fay, Irvine, Susan, Harrison, Linda J, Bobongie-Harris, Francis

### Published

2024

### Journal Title

International Journal of Early Years Education

### Version

Version of Record (VoR)

### DOI

[10.1080/09669760.2024.2405535](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2024.2405535)

### Rights statement

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

### Downloaded from

<https://hdl.handle.net/10072/433335>

### Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

# Prioritising children's participation in research: including children's voices in updating a national early learning framework

Lennie Barblett <sup>a</sup>, Jennifer Cartmel <sup>b</sup>, Leanne Lavina <sup>a</sup>, Fay Hadley <sup>c</sup>, Susan Irvine <sup>d</sup>, Linda J. Harrison <sup>c</sup> and Francis Bobongie-Harris <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia; <sup>b</sup>School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia; <sup>c</sup>School of Education, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia; <sup>d</sup>School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Involving children as stakeholders and including their voices in updating the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (for children birth to age 5) was a focus of this project design. The design was grounded in participatory approaches with a children's rights perspective, as the team prioritised seeking children's views and encouraging their agency on matters that affect them. This three-stage research project across 15 months sought children's input in each stage. Research methods consisted of everyday playful activities supported by educators in early childhood environments using dialogic drawing, talking circles and discussions using photo elicitation. Educators received information to support their use of these methods. While parents/carers gave ethical consent, children's assent was obtained. Across the three stages, analysis of children's drawings, comments and discussions showed the importance of their relationships with educators, their friends and the relationships between their educators and families. These findings demonstrate the importance of educators building reciprocal, respectful relationships with children and their families and between children. Further, these research methods fitted with the foundational pedagogical practices of the educators, with educators commenting on how useful they were and children on how they enjoyed using them.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 September 2023  
Accepted 12 September 2024

## KEYWORDS

Child centred; dialogic research; early childhood

## Introduction

The Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF] (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] 2022) is a nationally mandated framework that guides children's learning, development and wellbeing in early learning settings in Australia (birth to

**CONTACT** Lennie Barblett  l.barblett@ecu.edu.au  School of Education, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford St, Mount Lawley, Perth, WA 6050, Australia

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

age five years). In February 2023, updates to the framework (AGDE 2022) were published after a three-stage national research project conducted over 15 months, involving multiple stakeholders including children. Stage 1 sought to gather opinions on what should change or be kept; in stage 2, 20 recommendations for change were discussed; and stage 3 saw the piloting of the frameworks in 16 sites (including 13 early learning and three out of school hours settings). The research design, stages and the multiple methods used to collect data from adult participants (e.g. educators, parents and other early education stakeholders) have been discussed elsewhere (Hadley et al. 2021). From the literature review, as part of Phase 1 of the project that examined multiple early learning frameworks and associated research (see Barblett et al. 2021), there was no evidence at the time that any other nationally mandated early learning framework had asked or used the voices of children in its development. This paper reports and discusses how children's views were sought and gathered to inform the updates to the EYLF (AGDE 2022) across the three stages.

The first iteration of the EYLF in 2009 (DEEWR 2009) was part of the Commonwealth Government's initiative to signal the importance of childhood development through access to quality teaching and learning in education and care programmes before school (Coalition of Australian Governments [COAG] 2009). In this and the update (EYLF V2.0), the UN Rights of the Child [UNROC] (United Nations [UN] 1989) was a major consideration in describing 'the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their [children's] lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages' (AGDE 2022, 5). In addition, the EYLF recognised children's right to play and their agency and active participation in matters that affect them.

In promoting children's agency, Moss, Clark, and Kjørholt (2005) describe an increasing interest in seeking children's voices in research from the late 80s, as children are recognised as primary stakeholders or first-hand accountants of their own experiences. There are many views across the literature about the multiple discourses of research with children, such as positioning children's rights frameworks that highlight protection as well as participation (Mayne, Howitt, and Rennie 2018) or their participation with reconstructed notions of childhood or being a child (Wall 2022), and approaches that identify power relations with adults (Miller and Zugic 2022). Through a critical lens, the concept of voice as a single all-knowing entity is disrupted, with post-qualitative researchers suggesting that voice comes in many forms and is 'pluralised, polyvocal and messy' (Daelman, De Schauwer, and Van Hove 2020, 485). Therefore, in this research children's voices were sought across age groups, diverse contexts and using a variety of methods as amplifying voices was seen as 'a process of connecting bodies, objects, relations, spaces, tone and utterances, among others ...' (Mazzei 2016, quoted in Daelman, De Schauwer, and Van Hove 2020, 485).

In the development of this research, it was conceptualised that reaching children in their early childhood education and care [ECEC] setting and working with educators who they knew, was both pragmatic as well as cost effective. Such an approach drew on both the relational (which involves responsive connections between adults, children and their families) (see Beigi 2021) and place-based pedagogies (which refers to educators' understanding and application of context-specific knowledge about self, others and the world around us to inform practice) (see Duhn 2012).

### ***Place-based and relational perspectives in child centred research***

Children are active meaning-makers, learning through their interactions with people, places and materials. As such, they need opportunities to experience the sights, sounds, textures and relational connections of their local environment to enrich their concept of self within their understandings of family, community and larger societal influences (Puroila 2019). In this research, children's views were understood as occurring within diverse social and cultural settings. Such understanding involves recognising children's existing knowledge and experiences whilst providing the relational support necessary for children to meaningfully build upon learning through co-constructed interactions with others (Papatheodorou 2009). Consistent with Dewey (1916), they are seen as active agents, their views capable of shaping the learning and social communities of which they are a part. It is understood that exercising agency will be different for children in different settings as they experience their worlds in unique ways (Dockett and Perry 2010). As unique place-based experiences, children's sharing of ideas and views about what and who was important to them in early childhood environments was a valued focus of the research. Crucial to uncovering these unique perspectives is the idea of place consciousness, as children develop awareness of and connection with the physical, social, spiritual, geographic and historic environments influencing each child's sense of belonging (Deringer 2017; Erwin, Valentine, and Toumazou 2022). In addition, children's participation can be strengthened when research is conducted within familiar contexts with familiar people, these conditions fostering trust, autonomy, and independence (Brooker 2001).

Situating research in ECEC settings within place-based understandings requires thinking through power relations with others. Recognising power relations occur within learning environments also means interrogating understandings of 'who has power and knowledge' as this is often expressed through 'space and place' relations with children (Jobb 2019, 212). In this research project, children were seen as the knowledge holders of their own experiences and given the power, time and space to describe their opinions about matters that affect them. 'Space' in early childhood learning environments is understood as both a geographic location and a specific site of power. As a site of action, 'place' is seen as a space for enacting and potentially reshaping power. Recognising place and space as imbued with context-specific behavioural, cultural and emotional understandings speak of the shared actions, values and experiences occurring within (Nairn and Kraftl 2016). As a lived experience, children's place-based understandings are constructed through context-specific material and social interactions (Agnew 2011). With a specific focus on early childhood learning environments, Tuan (1977) argued relational understandings formed in space shape children's identities. Contemporary early education scholars echo the importance of early learning environments as places of shared knowledge construction with children (Harrison and Hutton 2014).

### **Research design**

Including young children to gain insights into their educational experiences to inform a nationally mandated learning framework, researchers worked with educators using a participatory framework. This was done to try to create 'meaningful, safe, and ethical spaces'

(Cuevas Parra 2020, 8) for children to express their views on the experiences, people and the world around them. Such approaches resist authoritarian pedagogical approaches with pre-set outcomes to embrace emergent pedagogies, sharing power and decision-making with children (Ruscoe, Barblett, and Barratt-Pugh 2018). The overarching question explored was: How are the methods of dialogic drawing, photo elicitation and talking circles effective in describing children's views to inform a nationally mandated early learning framework?

## Methods

Dialogic methods were utilised to gather children's views as they create space for relationships and allow for agency, trust and responsive meaning making (Lee 2022). Through relational practices children talk to educators about their lives and educators can ask questions so that 'thinking-feeling' moments are created (Ehret 2018). Adopting this approach positioned children as knowledgeable commentators on their own lives (Clark and Flewitt 2020). The combination of participatory methods used in this research supported young children's participation and contributions, shifting from a traditional focus on words to communicate to valuing other visual forms of data (Tay-Lim and Lim 2013). The everyday interactions along with the availability of materials assisted the co-construction of meanings with educators, as children considered self in relation to others and wider environments of influence (Clark and Flewitt 2020). Three dialogic child-centred research methods were utilised and are described.

### *Dialogic drawing*

As a participatory method well aligned with children's natural activity, dialogic drawing bridges traditional semi-structured interviews. Opening a democratic space of listening and communication, dialogic methods incorporating drawing afford children engagement opportunities (Ruscoe 2022) that are child-paced and sustaining (Alford 2015). Enabling inclusive forms of participation beyond oral expression, the use of dialogic drawing allowed children to draw what they enjoyed doing in their ECEC setting as well as indicate what additional provisions they would like included. Different question prompts introduced by educators across three phases (see Table 1) supported children's thinking about their experiences. Children were invited to participate individually or in small groups and educators talked, enquired about responses and noted words, utterances, gestures and facial expressions as children drew and talked. The inclusion of drawing processes provides an engaging experience for children to consider their responses.

### *Talking circles*

'Talking Circles' uses educator-guided conversation to prompt children's thinking about self as learner and person. Exchanges with others provide opportunities for children to share perspectives, negotiate differences and affirm their identities (Cartmel, Casley, and Smith 2017). As a rights-focused space, children are seen as thinkers, collaborators and change-makers. The educator functions as a facilitator to encourage children's

**Table 1.** Project questions across the 3 stages.

---

STAGE 1	<p>FOCUS: Finding out about the EYLF already used in settings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What do you like doing?</li> <li>– What is something we don't do here that you'd like to do? How could we do it better?</li> </ul>
STAGE 2	<p>FOCUS: Describing children's understandings of learning, what it can look like and testing some of the new ideas raised for change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What does learning look like? (Pedagogy)</li> <li>– What do you think are the most important things educators do here? (Relational Pedagogy)</li> <li>– What is your favourite place to play inside or outside and why? (Practices)</li> <li>– What do you think we should do to care for (setting), in our community, our planet?</li> </ul> <p>Some additional prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What is it like being here?</li> <li>– How does that make you feel?</li> <li>– Why is that important?</li> <li>– What do you like about that place/game/experience/ activity?</li> <li>– How do educators help you?</li> </ul>
STAGE 3	<p>FOCUS: Describing the pilot of the updated framework Similar to Phase 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What does learning look like? (Pedagogy)</li> <li>– What do you think are the most important things educators do here? (Relational Pedagogy)</li> <li>– Tell me about what happened</li> <li>– How do you feel about what happened?</li> <li>– How does it link to other things we do here, with your family or in your community?</li> <li>– How should we do this in the future?</li> </ul> <p>In this stage educators also asked questions in relation to the parts of the EYLF being trialled, this was an example given to educators about sustainability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What do you think we should do to care for (setting), in our community, our planet?</li> </ul>

---

discussion of social, cultural and community issues of personal and shared significance. In so doing, opportunities are opened for children to build relationships and connections as they voice perspectives, reflect on responses and explore possibilities favourable to both individual and group wellbeing (Cartmel, Casley, and Smith 2017). This method was carried out in small groups and started with a walk around the setting to orient children. Following this, educators sat and talked with children and noted their responses and comments. To reinforce the importance of equitable foundations, the research team provided educators with 'conversation starters' and 'closers' to support strategies for engaging children in Talking Circles to gain insight into both individual and small group thinking about their early learning experiences (see Table 1). Adopting a relational-based model, Talking Circles reinforced child–child and child–adult connections, and the consideration of relationships reaffirming children's sense of trust and safety (Cartmel and Casley 2014).

### **Photo elicitation and discussion**

As a visual participatory method, photo elicitation offers a useful non-verbal stimulus for supporting the recall of information, visual elements supporting the production of data beyond traditional dialogic forms to include felt aspects of memory and experience within a research conversation (Harper 2002). In this research, photo-elicitation used a range of photos such as environmental photos of play spaces and activities, as well as photos of children's drawings taken by educators. As engaging visual stimuli, the photos supported moments of shared attention as children revisited and clarified

meanings with educators, this process prompting deeper consideration of intentions and image content (Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2017). Assuming the role of facilitator (see Jenkins, Woodward, and Winter 2008), educators introduced photos or drawings as visual thinking points to support children's revisiting of intentions and understandings communicated, this process also affirming ownership of their lived experience in early learning settings (Shaw 2021). Prompts were also used to start children's dialogue about self and experience (see Table 1). Educators took descriptive notes of image content and talk, with this multimodal exchange of meaning key to understanding and valuing children's perspectives (Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2017).

### ***Building educator knowledge of research methods***

Empowering educators as well as children was a focus of this research process. The research team developed online guides shared with educators to describe how to implement the three methods to gather children's perspectives. These resources provided guidance on how to: describe the research to children and invite them to participate, set up the research method, ask question prompts and record children's drawings/conversations (including gestures, embodied learning and facial expressions), and being alert and responsive to children's decisions about participating and/or wanting to withdraw from the activity. For example, Stage 2 information included this advice for educators about talking circles:

1. Make sure you have read the ALF'S Update Discussion Paper so that you are aware of the background to the conversation starters supplied for the Talking Circle.
2. Engage with children and families to discuss the Talking Circles and the contribution they will make to the information gathered about updating the Frameworks. Make sure the parents have provided the consent form for their child to participate.
3. Read out the assent form to each child (before you do the activity) to make sure they agree to being involved in the research. If they agree and if they can, ask them to sign or make a mark on the form. Use the form to record the participants in the Talking Circle. Complete your name and sign as well.
4. Explain to the children in the group that researchers are really interested to hear from them about what they think. Remind them that there is no wrong answer, and they can either draw, write or tell you what they want to say.
5. Decide whether you are going to use one or more of the conversation starters. Rephrase the conversation starters to reflect the context e.g. maybe use the word teachers instead of educators; ECEC – here, kindy, school; OSHC – afters, Fun Club
6. Use conversation prompts. Then once the conversation has started use other prompts, for example, nodding, affirmation – mmm, tell me more, anything else, signal that you value their ideas to keep the conversation going.

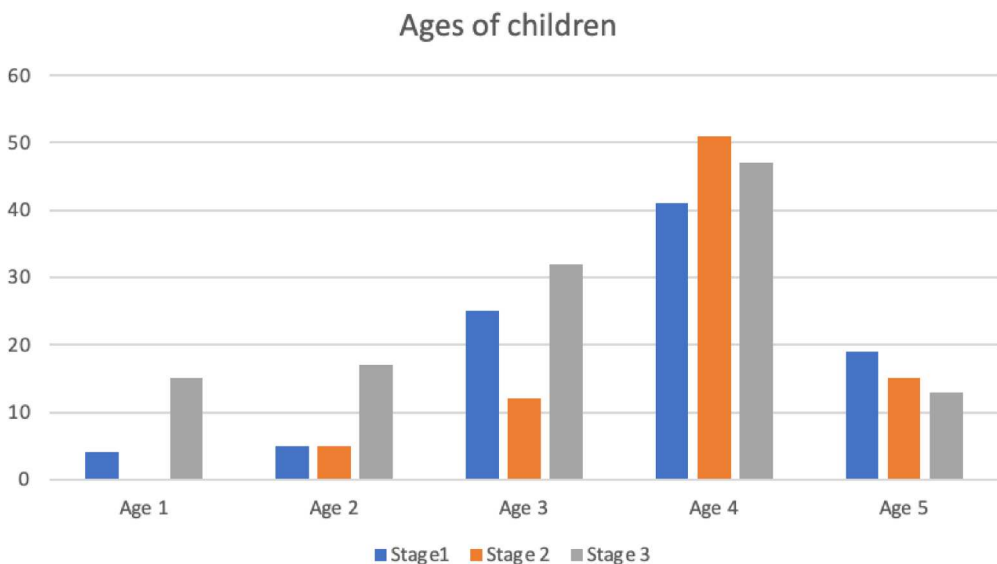
In whichever method was utilised or if they were used in integrated ways, the use of guided questions and prompts as developed by the research team was to be introduced by educators as part of their everyday interactions with children to gather information about their experiences. It is not known how many educators participated in this process in stages one and two, as only the artefacts were sent to the research team.

In stage three, 106 educators participated, and the Lead Educators of teams kept a weekly reflective journal over six weeks. In addition, one of the researchers visited each site to support educators and one remote site had weekly online meetings due to its geographic location.

Educators played a key role in recognising individual cues to learn more about children's perspectives. Educators also kept reflective journals and at times commented on the research methods or added more known information about children that assisted in describing the background to their perspectives. Alongside this, the collegial relationships built between the researchers and the educators were a focus where knowledge and skills were shared to support children's meaningful participation in research. Beginning questions included but were not limited to each stage are given below, educators in stage three developed these questions in relation to aspects of the update EYLF piloted in their setting. All three dialogic methods were used in each phase.

### Sample and recruitment

The research involved 346 children with 105 in stage one, 92 children in stage two and 149 children participating in stage three (as seen in [Figure 1](#)). In stages 1 and 2, children were recruited in two ways. First, through the eleven workplaces of educational leaders in the consortia (see [Hadley et al. 2021](#)) Second, by email to large early learning providers, professional associations and invitation on the website. Responses were uploaded to the website from the public domain. In stage 3, children were recruited from one of the 16 pilot sites including six of the stage one sites, children in six of the stage 1 sites gave their views across the three stages of the project. Of the 16 sites, 13 were early learning settings catering to children from birth to five years of age, and 13 out of school hours sites where children from the age of five years were present. Due to the nature of recruitment, more



**Figure 1.** Number of participants aged 1–5 years in each stage.



specific demographic data about the children was only collected in the third phase. The children who are reported here were in the age range one to five years with nearly half aged four years. One tenth of the sample in phase three identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 13 percent of the children spoke languages other than English in their home environment. More than two thirds of the children spoke Asian languages (Chinese, Korean, Hindi, Vietnamese). It was noted that 12 percent of children were described as requiring additional support to participate in the early learning settings. The support is related mainly to communication support (hearing loss, speech delays).

### **The ethics of researching with children**

Ethical approval was granted by the research team's University Ethics Committees E (52021991827988 & 20210009395) and guided by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] 2018) and Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia [ECA] 2016). Educators in all stages were supported by the researchers to create ethical spaces in which to ask for and gain children's assent after all parents had signed ethical consent. This support came in the provision of information such as that given above in the stage two advice for talking circles. Educators were asked to read out the assent form to each child before each activity to ensure the focus and practices were described and that children had options to be involved or not in the research. Children were then asked for their assent to be involved and asked to sign or make a mark on an assent form. Further, the involvement of trusted educators throughout the engagement processes Bourke (2017) suggests, reassures children of their agency and their right to agree to or refuse participation.

### **Analysis**

Descriptive thematic analysis was applied to the written data set by the researchers inducing similar initial impressions and themes. Educator's notes on children's responses and reflective journals assisted in generating a deeper understanding of the children's perspectives, acknowledging that in the analysis, adults were interpreting the content of drawings which can be deconstructed and interpreted in multiple ways (Baroutsis et al. 2019). The drawings were analysed using a deductive content framework and aspects of place, people, animals, participants, events, activities, or movement depicted, or named actions were used. Drawn emotions or feelings attributed to items in the picture were also noted. Each picture was viewed with educator notes of children's words, or gestures and emotions as they saw or heard them. In analysing all content, two researchers independently analysed the data. Where there was no consensus between the two, a third mediated.

### **Findings**

The findings showed that the methods were effective in assisting children to give their views on the questions asked and this data was then used in updating the EYLF

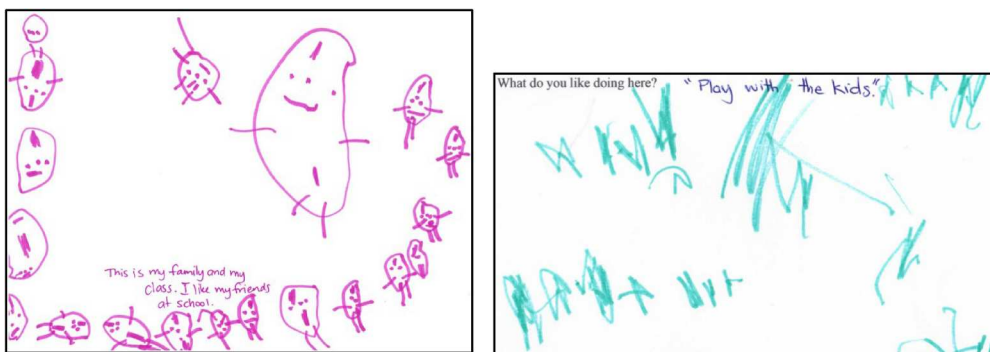
(AGDE 2022). Assisting in making these methods effective was the educators' knowledge of children brought about by their established relationships assisting in gaining and interpreting the data. The analysis of the data set showed the importance of place relationships in this process. The child-centred methods used showed that for children involved in the research, relationships 'within' and 'of' or 'with' place and people were described. Relationships with friends, educators and family, and 'of' or 'with' place with reference to the environment (indoor and outdoor), experiences and the affordances created were illustrated and discussed. In showing the effectiveness of these methods that children used to describe their views, the following findings are offered as examples.

### ***Place-based relationships with friends***

As a reoccurring thread across stages of the research, children identified the importance of friendships with others. One child drew and said, 'I like playing inside with my friends because they make us happy' [see Figure 2] (Child, 5 years, dialogic drawing, stage two). Another child in answering what she liked to do in her ECEC setting, drew and commented how she liked to 'play with the kids' (Child, 2 years and 6 months, dialogic drawing, stage one). Yet another child commented 'I like seeing my friends, drawing and painting' (Child aged 5 years, dialogic drawing, stage one).

### ***Place-based relationships with educators***

Relationships with educators were a main theme across the analysis. Content centred on what educators do or could do with children, with many positive comments about 'liking' educators. For example, one child said, 'I like all of my teachers, cos I like them cos they give me lots of food and activities to do like ready steady go' (Child, 4 years, talking circle, stage two). Another commented, 'My educator helps me to go to the toilet and wash my hands' (Child, 3 years, talking circle, stage two). Children had definitive views of what made a good educator. One child was commenting on educators in the infant's room and described that 'baby teachers should always be kind and cuddly' (Child, 4 years, talking circle, stage 2). A child said, 'A good teacher is someone who is smiley' (Child,



**Figure 2.** Friends (Child, 3 years, dialogic drawing, stage one and Child, 2 years 6-month, dialogic drawing, stage one).

4 years, talking circle, stage 2). Educators giving children a sense of safety was also shown and illustrated by the comments, ‘teachers keep kids safe’ (Child, 4 years 4 months, dialogic drawing, stage 2) and ‘the teachers look after us’ (Child, 3 years 6 months, talking circle, stage 2). Children in one setting were shown photos of themselves playing in various activities and children commented on the role of educators. A photo of building a volcano in the sandpit elicited these comments:

Child 1: ‘we made the volcanoes with friends and the teachers turned the tap on’

Child 2: ‘teachers help you with stuff’

The educator noted in the reflective journal that the discussion turned to the teacher’s role in children’s play, and the children had ‘definite ideas’ about what they should do and what they should not (Reflective journal kindergarten, regional, stage 3-week 6).

### **Place-based relationships with educators and families**

The presence of family and educator relationships was evident. A child’s drawing of ‘... me and my cousins at my school’ (see [Figure 3](#), dialogic drawing, stage 1) and her words as captured by the educators were ‘the triplets’. This child aged four years from a Torres Strait, South Sea and Māori background described having five cousins in the class was important to her. Educator’s understanding of this child’s family history added description to this drawing in the notes, as the three children drawn in purple are described by her family as ‘triplets’ (cousins of the same age) who are extremely close. This inside knowledge of the educator assisted researchers when analysing this child’s image and words.

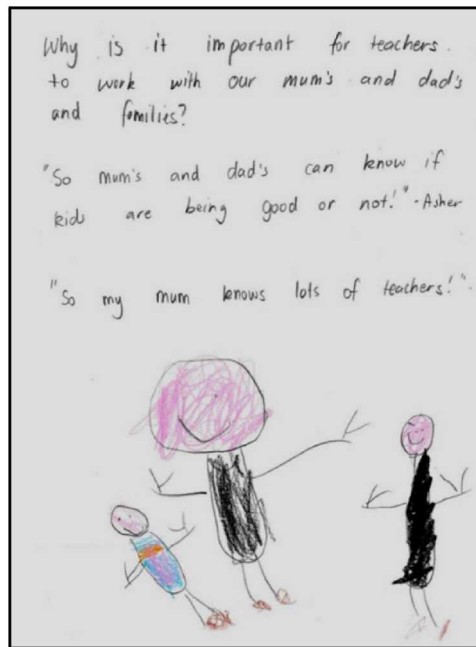
An important element in children’s drawings and conversations was the relationships between educators and their families (see [Figure 4](#)). Conversational and drawn responses revealed their awareness of educator-parent connections.

### **Place-based relationships with the environment**

Children across all stages drew and commented on their relationships ‘with’ and ‘within’ place, namely the indoor and outdoor environments and what they afforded. In phase one where children were asked ‘what would you like to do that you don’t get to do



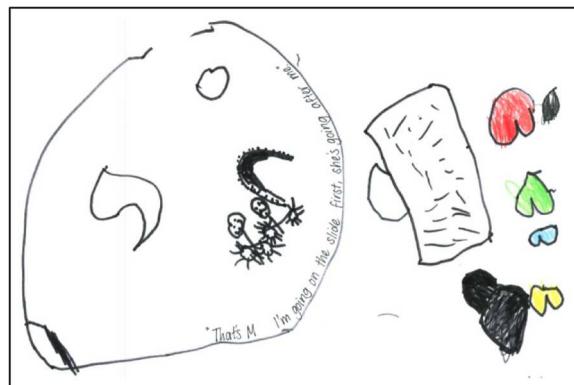
**Figure 3.** Child and family connections (Child, 4 years, dialogic drawing, stage one).



**Figure 4.** Relationships between families and educators (Child 3 years, dialogic drawing, stage two).

here?' most responses related to what could be termed 'risky play'. The inclusion of slides, monkey bars, flying foxes, trampolines and climbing trees were common responses. The following stage 1 responses from dialogic drawing demonstrate this: 'A slide with bars to climb' (Child 4 years); 'A swing and a slide' (Child 5 years, 1 month); and 'I would like a slide because slides are fun' (Child 4 years 1 month). Many pictures and discussions illustrated playing outside with equipment and friends. For example, this picture is described by a child aged 4 years and 11 months, 'I like playing outside on the playground, the slide and the whole playground. I like the trampolines and bounce on everything' (Figure 5).

With a particular focus on the outdoors, children emphasised specific material inclusions, structures and features shaping place possibilities and connections. For



**Figure 5.** Playing outside on the playground (Child, 4 years 11 months, dialogic drawing, stage one).

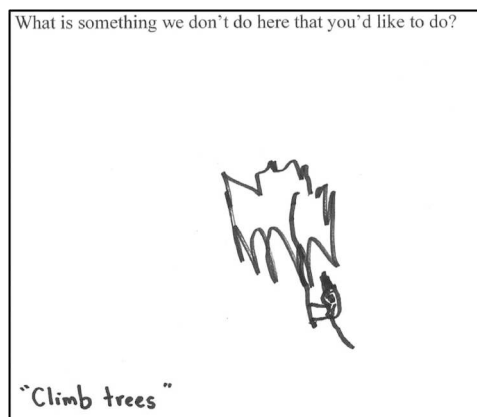
instance, one four-year-old child identified his desire to explore ‘larger-than-self’ natural features of the outdoors. In phase one, when asked about something he would like to do that is not done at this setting, his response ‘climb trees’ highlights the area specific management and monitoring of spaces (see [Figure 6](#)).

In stage 3, new ideas of the revised EYLF V2 (AGDE 2022) were tested with children. In one setting, children’s reflections on ideas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives with an emphasis on connection to the country were explored. A child aged five drew the setting’s Acknowledgement of Country ritual to demonstrate her understanding of connection to place [Figure 7](#).

In stage 3, the following examples were conversations about sustainability in all its forms. One child said that it was about caring for the land, ‘not putting rubbish in the ocean is important, turtles get stuck in plastic’ (4 years and 2 months) and another said ‘picking up rubbish is good. It makes me happy’ (4 years). While in another setting the children observed the educator’s writing and asked if they could add to the educator’s notes (see [Figure 8](#)).

### ***Practice responsiveness building children’s agency and wellbeing***

For many children, the data demonstrated that in building trusting relationships, educators used their knowledge of children which in turn generated responsive practice. This was often illustrated in the material and affective provisions made available by educators that supported children’s developing agency and participation in the learning environment. One child said, ‘I am just always so excited to do the things that I want to do’ (Child, 4 years, talking circle, stage two). A sense of happiness also appeared fundamental to children’s engagement and learning such as a child commenting, ‘When you are happy, you get smarter’ (Child, 4 years, talking circle, stage two). For one child, the cubby house represented a space of connection and comfort. As an extension of the home, the cubby set up by the educator enabled a sense of security and emotional attachment, the familiarity of this place helping her to ‘... relax my body’ (Child, 4 years, dialogic drawing, stage 2) (see [Figure 9](#)).




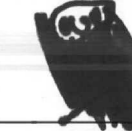


**Figure 6.** Climb trees (Child, 4 years, dialogic drawing, stage one).



**Figure 7.** Acknowledgement of Country ritual (Child, 5 years, dialogic drawing, stage three).

### **Educator's and children's reflections**

Educators in their reflective journals and in discussions with researchers commented how they would use these methods again in researching their practice through children's eyes and experiences. They described their surprise at the children wanting to be involved

What have you heard or thought about during this conversation that is interesting or important?	
	Plant some flowers and plants so we have bees come and make honey, for the people.
	We had four baby ducks hatch this week. They make me feel happy because I get to care for them and give food.
	The babies were all playing and calm, building in the sandpit.
	I love visiting the big ducks outside and the babies inside. They are so sweet watching them grow.
	I love my teacher let us play and visit the duck
	I love playing inside at kindly and drawing

**Figure 8.** Children's drawings are next to the educator's notes.



**Figure 9.** The cubby house (Child, 4 years, dialogic drawing, stage two).

when the research was explained, as one child said, 'I like answering your questions can we do this again?' (Child, 4 years, stage 2). Another educator wrote at the top of her notes that the child aged three did not want her words audio-recorded but instructed the educator to write them down. One Educational Leader wrote about how the staff and children were reflecting on the idea of consent. She wrote:

... will be seeking children's perspectives on the Updated EYLF and have had rich discussions about what consent means with children to support an understanding of the project. What is consent? Why are we asking it? ... It has been very empowering for children and confirmed interest in children's perspectives and participation - very agentic.

It is noted from the reflective journals in stage 3 that educators integrated photo elicitation and often did not use photos as a single method of data collection. At times they were used in Talking Circles and as a prompt for dialogic drawing by some educators.

## Discussion

The findings showed that the methods were effective in assisting children to give their views to inform the development of the EYLF (AGDE, 2022). This was bought about not only by the methods but also by the children working with educators who children already knew, and with whom they had a relationship. The data gathered and then analysed drew on both educators' relationships with children and the contextual knowledge they had of children and their families. As trusted adults in the lives of participating children, a sense of ease with educators was already established, this foundation supported children's understanding of the research purpose (see Clark 2017). Yet, it is not always easy to find the time in research schedules to build relationships, however developing a sense of trust is a critical relational element in researching with children (Dockett and Perry 2010). Such existing relationships can support children's participation in research as knowing their interests and preferences can assist in gauging preverbal children's comfort in participation (Dockett and Perry 2010). Furthermore, educators were able to use their knowledge of participating children as valuable insight into understanding children's place of belonging and relationships within learning contexts (AGDE 2022).

A dominant theme in children's responses noted the importance of their relationships with their educators. In the research with children, established child-educator relationships reaffirmed connections, enabling children to express themselves and their knowledge in verbal, non-verbal and gestural ways already known by familiar educators (see Pain 2012). Educator awareness and value for children's diverse ways of communicating was key to elevating interactions beyond passive exchange. To support this process, the research team emphasised listening within participation in everyday experiences as a '... dynamic process which involves children and adults discussing meanings' thereby reassuring educators the research was not about 'extracting information', rather, an active sharing of power and meaning just as they would in their daily teaching and learning with children (Clark 2005, 491). The participatory nature of methods affirmed children's agency, pedagogical listening (Rinaldi 2006) magnifying educators' understanding of children's experience in early learning environments.

### ***Children as commentators on their own lives***

Feminist researchers have argued for more equitable relationships between the researcher and the researched and give rise to participant empowerment (MacNaughton, Smith, and Davis 2006).

Gathering children's views is consistent with honouring the diverse social histories and experiences characterising children's lives, these forces shape how they are seen and understood in early learning environments (Alvarez 2018). The combination of participatory methods used in this research supported young children's participation and contributions, shifting from a traditional focus on words to communicate to valuing other visual forms of data (Tay-Lim and Lim 2013). The everyday interactions along with the availability of materials assisted the co-construction of meanings with educators, as children considered self in relation to others and wider environments of influence (Clark and Flewitt 2020).

Children especially in stage 3, demonstrated their capability in considering both immediate and larger issues impacting their experience of social and natural environments (Erwin, Valentine, and Toumazou 2022) with regard to sustainability. The children's 'pro-environmental' response affirmed their protective stance on the environment as they expressed their growing knowledge and commitment to make a positive difference (Chawla 2020). Viewing learning environments in terms of their space and place potentials, reconceptualises binaries associated with educator-directed power to co-construct understandings of material and affective encounters with children (Jobb 2019). Further, in response to children's views, a new principle of sustainability was added (see EYLF AGDE 2022, 17), as well as a better description of the practice called learning environments where children's thoughts, ideas and participation are invited and encouraged (see EYLF AGDE 2022, 23). Reflecting children's views on this principle and practice, additions throughout all five learning outcomes were made (see EYLF AGDE 2022, 17 and 30–62)

### **Limitations**

While support materials were given to educators across the three stages, the researchers had no control over the processes in which educators obtained consent or asked



questions. Also, the way in which the researchers interpret children's data is always open for misinterpretation or may have meanings ascribed that are not meant by children. Therefore, there are limitations in the collection of the children's data. Furthermore, as much as attempts were made to mediate power dynamics these will always be present because of the nature of child and adult entities. Asking children to comment on their relationships with their educators, acknowledging there is a power relationship, may have excluded honest conversations as children may have felt obliged to present a different view.

## Conclusion

In this research, participatory approaches with children involved leveraging established relationships with trusted educators as co-researchers to gather children's perspectives on their lived educational experience. Children's views across all three stages of this project assisted in informing the changes in the nationally mandated Early Years Learning Framework as the two examples given above show (AGDE 2022; Hadley et al. 2021). At the time of the Phase 1 literature review, no evidence was shown that children's views had been sought by these methods and then incorporated into a nationally mandated learning framework. Working with educators using everyday pedagogical practices such as conversations, drawing and reflection on images gathered children's thoughts and perspectives and was effective. Educators had prior knowledge of young children's experiences that assisted in the analysis of data, information that is not always available to external researchers. This research strengthens the literature that illustrates that children are powerful informers, and their voices should be heard on matters that affect them (UN 1989), especially in the development of learning frameworks that impact their lives. Educators who have trusting relationships with the children they work with are a valuable conduit for obtaining children's perspectives. More curriculum bodies and government instrumentalities should be encouraged to use child-centred methods and support educators to assist so that children's views are gathered and incorporated into policy documents. However, access to professional learning, practical resources and time to be able to talk and listen with children and educators that are part of their everyday experiences is required.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by ACECQA; Australian Childrens Education and Care Quality Authority.

## ORCID

Lennie Barblett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0510-2244>

Jennifer Cartmel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5345-7851>

Leanne Lavina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6849-8624>

Fay Hadley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1766-7309>

Susan Irvine  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8760-9852>

Linda J. Harrison  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3835-6283>

Francis Bobongie-Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3846-3428>

## References

- Agnew, J. 2011. "Place and Space." In *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, edited by J. Agnew and D. Livingstone, 316–330. Los Angeles: SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446201091>.
- Alford, C. 2015. "Drawing the Universal Language of Children." *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work* 12 (1): 45–62.
- Alvarez, A. 2018. "Drawn and Written Funds of Knowledge: A Window into Emerging Bilingual Children's Experiences and Social Interpretations through Their Written Narratives and Drawings." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 18 (1): 97–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798417740618>
- Australian Government Department of Education. 2022. *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf>
- Barblett, L., Cartmel, J., Hadley, F., Harrison, L. J., Irvine, S., Bobongie-Harris, F., and Lavina, L. 2021. *National Quality Framework Approved Learning Frameworks Update: Literature Review*. Australian Children's Educations and Care Quality Authority.
- Baroutsis, A., L. Kervin, A. Woods, and B. Comber. 2019. "Understanding Children's Perspectives of Classroom Writing Practices through Drawings." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 20 (2): 177–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117741743>.
- Beigi, R. 2021. "Relational Pedagogy: Relationships in Dialogic Spaces" In *Early Years Pedagogy and Practice: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*. By R. Beigi, 158–181. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Bourke, R. 2017. "The Ethics of Including and 'Standing Up' for Children and Young People in Educational Research." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21 (3): 231–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1260823>.
- Brooker, L. 2001. "Interviewing Children. Doing Early Childhood: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice." In *Doing Early Childhood: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, edited by G. McNaughton, S. A. Rolfe, and I. Siraj-Blatchford, 162–179. London: Routledge.
- Cartmel, J., and M. Casley. 2014. "Talking Circles: Building Relationships with Children." *Communities, Children and Families Australia* 8 (1): 67–80.
- Cartmel, J., M. Casley, and K. Smith. 2017. "Talking Circles." In *Health & Wellbeing in Childhood*. edited by S. Garvis and D. Pendergast, 2nd ed., 210–221. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chawla, L. 2020. "Childhood Nature Connection and Constructive Hope: A Review of on Connecting with Nature and Coping with Environmental Loss." *People and Nature* 2 (3): 619–642. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10128>
- Clark, A. 2005. "Listening to and Involving Young Children: A Review of Research and Practice." *Early Child Development and Care* 175 (6): 489–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131288>.
- Clark, A. 2017. *Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishing.
- Clark, A., and R. Flewitt. 2020. "The Competent Child: Valuing All Young Children as Knowledgeable Commentators on Their Lives." *Review of Science, Mathematics and ICT Education* 14 (2): 9–24.
- Coalition of Australian Governments [COAG]. 2009. *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business. National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*. Author. [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/nation\\_framework\\_protecting\\_children.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/nation_framework_protecting_children.pdf)

- Cuevas Parra, P. 2020. "Co-Researching with Children in the Time of COVID-19: Shifting the Narrative on Methodologies to Generate Knowledge." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920982135>.
- Daelman, S., E. De Schauwer, and G. Van Hove. 2020. "Becoming-with Research Participants: Possibilities in Qualitative Research with Children." *Childhood (Copenhagen, Denmark)* 27 (4): 483–497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568220927767>.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR]. 2009. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/201802/belonging\\_being\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/201802/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)
- Deringer, S. A. 2017. "Mindful Place-Based Education: Mapping the Literature." *Journal of Experiential Education* 40 (4): 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825917716694>.
- Dewey, J. 1916. "Democracy and Education." In *The Middle Works*, edited by J. A. Boydston, 3–370. Southern, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dockett, S., J. Einarsdottir, and B. Perry. 2017. "Photo Elicitation: Reflecting on Multiple Sites of Meaning." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 25 (3): 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1329713>.
- Dockett, S., and B. Perry. 2010. "Researching with Young Children: Seeking Assent." *Child Indicators Research* 4 (2): 231–247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-010-9084-0>.
- Duhn, I. 2012. "Places for Pedagogies, Pedagogies for Places." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 13 (2): 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.2.99>.
- Early Childhood Australia [ECA]. 2016. *Code of Ethics*. <https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ECA-COE-Brochure-web-2019.pdf>
- Ehret, C. 2018. "Moments of Teaching and Learning in a Children's Hospital: Affects, Textures, and Temporalities." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 49 (1): 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12232>.
- Erwin, E. J., M. Valentine, and M. Toumazou. 2022. "The Research of Belonging in Early Childhood Education: Complexities and Possibilities." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 32 (1): 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2022.2128307>
- Hadley, F., L. Harrison, S. Irvine, L. Barblett, J. Cartmel, and F. Bobongie-Harris. 2021. *Discussion Paper: 2021 National Quality Framework Approved Learning Frameworks Update*. ACECQA. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-09/2021NQF-ALF-UpdateDiscussionPaper.PDF>
- Harper, D. 2002. "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies* 17 (1): 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345>.
- Harrison, A., and L. Hutton. 2014. *Design for the Changing Educational Landscape: Space, Place and the Future of Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, N. K., R. Woodward, and T. Winter. 2008. "The Emergent Production of Analysis in Photo Elicitation: Pictures of Military Identity." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social* 9:3. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-9.3.1169>.
- Jobb, C. 2019. "Power, Space, and Place in Early Childhood Education." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 44 (3): 211–232. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs29596>
- Lee, C. 2022. "Ethical Perplexities of Researching with Children in Uncertain Times: A Dialogic Approach." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 31 (1-2): 124–147 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2021.1925140>
- MacNaughton, G., K. Smith, and K. Davis. 2006. "Researching with Children: The Challenges and Possibilities for Building 'Child Friendly' Research." In *Early Childhood Qualitative Research*, edited by J. Hatch, 167–184. Melbourne: Routledge.
- Mayne, F., C. Howitt, and L. J. Rennie. 2018. "A Hierarchical Model of Children's Participation Rights Based on Information, Understanding, Voice, and Influence." *European Early Childhood Education Journal* 26 (5): 644–656. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1522480>.
- Miller, K., and Zugic, N. J. 2022. "Research Relationships and Positionality: Adult-Child Power Relationships." In *Ethical Evidence and Policy Making*, edited by R. Iphofen and D. O'Mathuna, 272–292. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Moss, P., A. Clark, and A. T. Kjørholt. 2005. "Introduction." In *Beyond Listening: Children's Perspectives on Early Childhood Services*, edited by P. Moss, A. Clark, and A. T. Kjørholt, 1–16. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Nairn, K., and P. Kraftl. 2016. *Space, Place, and Environment: Geographies of Children and Young People*. Singapore: Springer.
- National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC]. 2018. *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (Updated 2018)*.
- Pain, H. 2012. "A Literature Review to Evaluate the Choice and Use of Visual Methods." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 11 (4): 303–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100401>.
- Papatheodorou, T. 2009. "Exploring Relational Pedagogy" In *Learning Together in the Early Years. Exploring Relational Pedagogy*, edited by T. Papatheodorou and J. Moyles, 3–18. New York: Routledge.
- Puroila, A. 2019. "Who am I? Shaping Young Children's Identities through Everyday Narratives." In *Story in Children's Lives: Contributions of the Narrative Mode to Early Childhood Development, Literacy, and Learning*, edited by K. J. Kerry-Moran and J. A. Aerila, 55–75. *Educating the Young Child*, Vol. 16. Indiana: Springer.
- Rinaldi, C. 2006. *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia. Listening, Researching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Ruscoe, A. 2022. "Dialogic Drawing: A Method for Researching Abstract Phenomenon in Early Childhood." *Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 7:1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1163/23644583-bja10036>.
- Ruscoe, A., L. Barblett, and C. Barratt-Pugh. 2018. "Sharing Power with Children as Agentic Learners." *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 43 (3): 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.3.07>.
- Shaw, P. A. 2021. "Photo-Elicitation and Photo-Voice: Using Visual Methodological Tools to Engage with Younger Children's Voices about Inclusion in Education." *International Journal of & Method in Education* 44 (4): 337–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1755248>.
- Tay-Lim, J., and S. Lim. 2013. "Privileging Younger Children's Voices in Research: Use of Drawings and a Co-Construction Process." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 12 (1): 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691301200135>.
- Tuan, Y. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- United Nations. 1989. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCROC]. <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>
- Wall, J. 2022. "From Childhood Studies to Childism: Reconstructing the Scholarly and Social Imaginations." *Children's Geographies* 20 (3): 257–270 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>