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**This is the author version of an article published as:**

Barblett, L., Bobongie-Harris, F., Cartmel, J., Hadley, F., Harrison, L., Irvine, S., & Lavina, L. (2023). 'We're not useless, we know stuff!' Gathering children's voices to inform policy. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 48(2), 134–147

**Access to the published version:**

<https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391221139912>

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# “We’re not useless, we know stuff!” Gathering children’s voices to inform policy.

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## Abstract

Key words: EYLF, children’s voices, multimodal methodologies

“We’re not useless, we know stuff!” said a four-year-old when asked why adults should ask him what he thinks about his experiences at his early learning centre. This paper describes the literature and methods used to gather children’s’ voices in early childhood and education (ECEC) settings across Stage 1 and 2 of the three stage national Learning Frameworks (ALFs) Update project. Asking children about their ideas and experiences was undertaken by familiar educators using research tools designed and supported by the research team. The methods of dialogic drawing, talking circles and visual elicitation were described and further explained to enable educators to gather children’s perspectives on their learning experiences in ECEC contexts. We reflect on the efficacy of these methods, approaches and strategies to support meaning-making from a diverse representation of children and how this can influence policy decision making.

## Introduction

In 2021, the update of two Australian Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFs); Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and My Time our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia (MTOPI)(DEEWR, 2011) began. Both frameworks are policies that are directly related to children’s lives and their education and care experiences. Engaged by Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] on behalf of all governments, the project team, led by a tripartite University partnership research team, comprised six researchers who worked closely with six experienced educators, and were supported by a consortium of 20 early childhood professionals and academics; and a senior transdisciplinary advisory group. Key direction was set out in the Terms of Reference (ACECQA, 2021) and decision making on the project was initiated by the research team and overseen by all governments and ACECQA.

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3 The project was undertaken in three stages, each designed to engage with and  
4 gather stakeholder perspectives:

5 Stage 1: Online surveys for families, educators, other professionals, and approved  
6 providers to ascertain the strengths, gaps and silences of the two frameworks and  
7 multimodal methods to gather children's voices were developed. Online focus  
8 groups were held with state/territory policy and regulatory officers.

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10 Stage 2: A literature review combined with the analysis of Stage 1 data were used to  
11 develop a discussion paper with 20 recommendations for updating the ALFs.

12 Stakeholder feedback on the 20 recommended areas was gained through a second  
13 online survey, written submissions, methods to gather children's voices and a series  
14 of Delphi panels engaging a purposeful sample of sector stakeholders.

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16 Stage 3: The Stage 1 and 2 analysed data were used to prepare updated versions of  
17 the EYLF and MTOP for trialing in 16 education and care settings across Australia.  
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21 In this paper we describe and reflect on the methods, approaches and strategies  
22 used in Stages 1 and 2 to gather children's voices about their experiences in their  
23 ECEC setting used in refreshing the EYLF. Further details on other methods used  
24 with adult stakeholders are reported elsewhere (Hadley et al., 2021).  
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## 27 **The voices of children in research**

28  
29 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCROC] (United  
30 Nations, 1989) re-positioned young children from passive recipients to social actors,  
31 influencing the development and use of child participatory research methods  
32 (Cuevas Parra, 2020) to capture children's perspectives of their worlds (Clark, 2017;  
33 Hapenny, 2021). The UNCROC (1989) highlights the rights of children to 'be heard'  
34 and the 'freedom of expression'. Democratic participatory approaches are those  
35 that enable children to be involved in some way that influences their education and  
36 care provision and offer children "a fuller range of participation", enabling children's  
37 *authorship* of their ideas and experiences (Blaisdell et al., 2021, p. 1). Positioning  
38 children as competent social actors and experts in their lives challenges traditional  
39 views of children as compliant or passive recipients of research and reinforces their  
40 competency as skilled communicators capable of making meaningful decisions.  
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45 In this project we sought to include children's voices to inform the  
46 recommendations for updating the EYLF. Using the term 'voice' alludes to a chain of  
47 command where children are othered as less powerful than adults and assumes that  
48 all children share a single view (Murray, 2019). Voice is also a term used in the  
49 discourses of "power, identity and empowerment" (Maybin, 2012, p.383). Murray  
50 suggests a more pluralistic definition of children's 'voices' as "the views of children  
51 that are actively received and acknowledged as valuable contributions to decision  
52 making affecting the children's lives" (p.1). This is the definition used in this paper  
53 with a view that using research to gather children's voices acknowledges their ability  
54 to impact their world and empowers them to be agents of change. Therefore,  
55 opportunities are afforded for children to share power with adults, develop an  
56 identity as a knowledgeable communicator who others listen and respond to, and  
57 build a voice worth hearing (Maybin, 2012).  
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## Literature Review

### ***Capturing children's voices***

To authentically capture children's voices, educators and researchers need to consider children as individuals or as part of a collective who are capable of forming their own views. Furthermore, a context of reciprocity, sensitivity and an ethic of care is required to understand children's multi-modal ways of communicating (Murray, 2019; Nodding, 1988). Wyness (2013) suggests a scaffolded approach is needed, supporting participation alongside consideration of child-adult relationships. In this way, voices are shared through processes of co-construction where "adult and child" perspectives are equally valued as ideas and communication processes unfold (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013, p. 65). The role of the researcher as co-constructor assumes particular importance in supporting children's participation and expression as they narrate and depict experiences (Tay Lim, 2013).

Children are excellent communicators and meaning-makers across multiple material, visual, and aural modes (Bock, 2016; Wright, 2007). Researchers can support educators' facilitation of sensorial approaches (see Clark, 2017) associated with drawing and symbolic expression to enable children to communicate their feelings. These methods can reveal children's responses to educational experiences in particular socio-cultural contexts (Halpenny, 2021). Recognising the rich communicative value of integrating a variety of textual, visual and verbal modes, the application of multimodal methods supports children's meaningful engagement in research.

### ***Drawing and Dialogic Drawing***

Drawing has long been considered a means of communication and as such, drawings have been analysed as a data source (e.g. Harrison, 2014; Kress, 1997; Pahl, 1999). Children's drawings reveal meanings made from their experiences, with selected signs and symbols communicating understandings of events, issues and interests of personal relevance (Wright, 2007). Children use both visual and verbal forms of communication when creating their drawings, with representations often taking shape alongside dialogic reflections on their process (McCormack et al., 2022; Wright, 2007). Such 'telling' provides insight into children's creative process; also providing windows into their knowledge, relationships, and friendships (Coates & Coates, 2006).

Using draw-and-talk methods as an intentional strategy and extending upon Einarsdóttir's work (2011), Ruscoe (2022) further developed this method as 'dialogic drawing'. In this method children are invited to respond using a cyclic process of adult prompting children's ideas, using respectful listening, pausing for the enactment of drawing, and clarification of the children's representations and comments. Einarsdóttir et al. (2009) advocate the benefit of using drawing methodologies with children based on the following rationale. First, it allows children some control over the nature of the engagement in data collection. Second, it is a non-confrontational way to interact, and children do not need to maintain eye

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3 contact which may lead to feelings of unease. Third, it provides familiar tools and  
4 materials to encourage children's drawing and conversations. Fourth, children are  
5 encouraged to take time to respond to questions as they take time to draw. Fifth,  
6 drawing methodologies recognise that children may like to use a variety of methods  
7 (verbal and non-verbal) to respond.  
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### 10 11 **Talking circles**

12 As a form of "thinking about learning", Talking Circles provide children with a space  
13 to talk, listen, connect with others, and affirm self-concept (Cartmel & Casley, 2014,  
14 p. 67). Through processes of "talking and listening", children are provided with  
15 opportunities to exchange ideas, develop communication strategies and build  
16 relationships with both adults and other children, thereby supporting essential skills  
17 for engaging with diverse perspectives on issues impacting their experience (Cartmel  
18 & Casley, 2014, p. 67). Within this relationship, Scharmer (2009) describes the  
19 adult's facilitation role as key to establishing a safe and trusting environment where  
20 children feel able to contribute. In this method, the adult uses observation,  
21 attentiveness and openness informing the co-construction of meanings generated.  
22 Establishing relationships to reduce the power differential with children in Talking  
23 Circles requires adults to adopt responsive listening approaches of connection and  
24 reflection (Cartmel & Casley, 2014, p. 78). Mazutis and Slawinski (2008) describes an  
25 awareness of self and others as crucial to uncovering and generating new  
26 knowledge.  
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### 33 **Visual elicitation**

34 Visual elicitation involves using photographs or visual images such as drawings, to  
35 gather responses. These resources help to clarify areas of focus, whilst supporting  
36 the recollection and communication of perspectives (Harper, 2002). Such an  
37 approach acknowledges children and their agency in ways that generate new  
38 knowledge (Shaw, 2021). Harper (2002, p.13) notes the power of images to "evoke  
39 deeper elements of human consciousness" with word-image exchanges activating  
40 greater brain processing to generate information. Visual elicitation also mediates  
41 potential adult-child power imbalances, with children positioned as active co-  
42 constructors of emerging narratives (Shaw, 2021). Using visual images to support  
43 memories of their experiences enables younger children to "express understanding  
44 and experience of their lives" in ways that are emotion filled and authored by  
45 children themselves (Shaw, 2021, p. 348). For example, using photographs can  
46 provide a visual inventory of objects, people or situations which assist in creating  
47 deeper understandings of the phenomena under examination (Ford et al., 2017). For  
48 this method to be effective and to ensure authentic interpretation of children's  
49 perceptions, Shaw (2021) advises that trusting relationships are needed to uncover  
50 meanings of lived experience through natural interactions in familiar environments.  
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### 57 **Design and Methodology**

58 In designing this component of the ALFs Update project across all three stages, we  
59 used a participatory framework based on commitment to a "rights-based approach,  
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3 where children's evolving expertise is valued" (Gibbs et al., 2018, p. 93). In this way,  
4 the study aimed to gather diverse views of children, as key stakeholders, to inform  
5 the refresh of the EYLF.  
6

### 8 ***Ethical considerations***

9 Ethical approval was given by Macquarie University, Queensland University of  
10 Technology and Edith Cowan University Ethics Committees ([52021991827988](#) &  
11 [20210009395](#) & [202102588](#)) and the research team was also guided by the ECA  
12 Code of Ethics (2016) when preparing the descriptions and actions for educators. As  
13 familiar and trusted figures in the lives of these children, the educators assumed a  
14 pivotal role in providing a supportive context to stimulate children's thinking about  
15 and response to specific research questions.  
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19 Every child who participated had written consent from parents/carers and were  
20 verbally asked for their assent to participate and were told they could decline the  
21 invitation or leave at any time. Inviting both parent consent and child assent is well  
22 recognised as sound practice, with children's assent assuming equal relevance to  
23 that obtained from parents or guardians (Cuevas Parra, 2020). In addition, an  
24 animated movie clip voiced by an eight year old child explained the research aim  
25 and the child's role. This was made available at the time on the project website for  
26 educators to use with children.  
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### 30 ***Samples***

31 Stage 1: The six experienced early childhood educators from diverse early childhood  
32 settings who were part of the ALFs Update research consortium were asked to  
33 support the elicitation of children's views and experiences of ECEC in Stage 1.  
34 Children within these settings who had signed parental consent were asked for  
35 assent to participate by the educator. These educators were all female and had  
36 worked with children for at least ten years. They were selected from a pool of  
37 educators generated from suggestions from colleagues and the consortium to  
38 include experienced educators who worked in diverse ECEC settings included: family  
39 day care; preschool/kindergarten in schools; and long day care centres across  
40 Australia. These diverse settings varied by socio-economic area, and were operated  
41 by a mix of approved providers, including schools, and centres owned by single  
42 service and large providers. The sample included one setting led by an Aboriginal  
43 community group, and two settings immersed within their communities with 80% of  
44 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at one of these settings. There were also  
45 two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander project researchers working with two of  
46 these settings. A total of 102 children aged 2 to 5 years participated, including  
47 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, culturally and linguistically diverse  
48 children, as well as children with disability.  
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55 Stage 2: We extended the invitation to participate in Stage 2 to ECEC services across  
56 Australia via the ALFs project website. Participating ECEC settings included family  
57 day care schemes, long day care centres, stand-alone kindergartens or preschools,  
58 and kindergartens in schools across urban, regional, and remote regions of Australia  
59 in varied socio-economic areas. Educators followed the same recruitment protocols  
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3 of inviting children with parental consent for assent to participate as in Stage 1 and  
4 educators were also able to use the animated movie-clip available at the time to  
5 explain the activity to the children. A total of 92 children aged 2 to 5-years  
6 participated, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, culturally and  
7 linguistically diverse children, as well as children with disabilities.  
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### 10 ***Tools and instructions***

11 In Stage 1, information on how to use the three methods (Drawing and Dialogic  
12 Drawing, Talking Circles, Visual Elicitation) were developed with the six experienced  
13 educators to use in their ECEC settings and acted as a pilot for Stage 2. Templates  
14 were provided for educators to use when gathering children's responses in drawings  
15 and talking circles. In Stage 1, children were asked to respond to the following  
16 questions:  
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19 *What do you like doing here?*

20 *What is something we don't do here that you'd like to do?*  
21  
22

23 In Stage 2, the templates used in Phase 1 were refined in consultation with the six  
24 educators who used them and included new prompts. In this stage, children were  
25 invited to think/talk/draw or view visual artefacts that educators may have gathered  
26 about some of the recommendations for updating the EYLF in the Stage 2 Discussion  
27 paper (Hadley et al., 2021). The recommended areas as per the ALF's Discussion  
28 Paper (Hadley et al., 2021) covered the vision, pedagogy, principles, practices and  
29 learning outcomes and were used as a guide for child friendly prompts as detailed  
30 below. An online session was held for interested educators, recorded and published  
31 on the project website for future reference by educators who wanted to use these  
32 methods. Children could participate either individually or in small groups.  
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36 Acknowledging the challenge of determining the questions to engage diverse  
37 children (Clark, 2010), the questions were suggestions and educators were  
38 encouraged to adapt these for individual children and contexts. In both Stages 1 and  
39 2 the six experienced educators gave feedback on how the prompts were changed  
40 for children who were emergent drawers and communicators. Educators could use  
41 their own prompts or draw from those suggested by researchers. Drawing on  
42 mindfulness practices which seek to make children aware of their own body, inner  
43 emotions or tensions and being present in the moment (Nieminen & Sajaniemi,  
44 2014) the research protocol for educators using Talking Circles suggested that  
45 educators and children start with a slow walk around the setting or room to settle  
46 the children and rest their minds. It was suggested that the educator and children  
47 stop, take deep breaths, and then open their eyes wide and take a few minutes to  
48 look very slowly around the setting. The aim was to see all aspects of the room,  
49 insignificant and subtle details. This assisted children to focus and start the practice  
50 of 'noticing.'  
51

52 They were then asked questions, such as:

53 *What is it like being here?*

54 *How does that make you feel?*

55 *Why is that important?*

56 *What do you like about that place/game/experience/activity?*  
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3 *How do educators help you?*

4 *What do you think we should care for here at our centre, at home or in the*  
5 *world/planet?*

6 *What do think are the most important things educators do here at our centre?*

7 *What is your favourite place to play inside or outside or things to do here at our*  
8 *centre?*

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12 In both Stage 1 and 2 educators at times transcribed children's comments on their  
13 drawings (with the child's permission) and wrote down conversations.

### 14 15 **Data analysis**

16 The children's drawings and conversations documented by educators were  
17 considered one data unit and were analysed through a process of inductive and  
18 deductive content analyses (Cohen et al., 2018). To begin, the drawings were  
19 analysed for their content as to what they depicted, applying the principles of open  
20 coding and inducing categories from common content in the drawings (Merriman &  
21 Guerin, 2006). The induced codes taken from the content captured in the following  
22 ways the geographic or situation named location; people, animals or participants in  
23 the drawing, named actor(s) and the activities or movement depicted, named  
24 action(s). Next, using these determined structural categories of location, actor(s)  
25 and action(s), deductive analysis was carried across the full data set. These three  
26 categories are relevant to actor-network theory where each situation which can be  
27 called a network and is made up of actants both human and non-human each  
28 equally important in the role they play and must be considered (see Latour, 2005).  
29 Each item was analysed by at least two of the researchers and where consensus not  
30 reached was reviewed by a third. All items had at least one of the categories  
31 present. This data analysis was then viewed in relation to the EYLF Vision, Principles,  
32 Practices and Outcomes (DEEWR, 2009) where relational viewing identified  
33 alignment and misalignment from the data generated by the children in each of  
34 these areas to inform the thinking about updating this document.

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41 All data presented in this article has been de-identified and all names are  
42 pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of the participants as per ethical guidelines.

### 43 44 45 **Discussion and reflection**

46 The intent of this paper is to discuss the efficacy of the methods used to support  
47 meaning-making when gathering children's voices and how this approach could be  
48 adopted for informing policy decision making. Our intention in this section is not to  
49 provide the findings from the research but represent a reflection on the methods  
50 used with children. Examples show the valuable input that children can make to  
51 research when using these inclusive and multimodal methods.

### 52 53 54 55 **The drawing methods**

56 The two drawing methods (Dialogic drawing and Talking Circles) elicited depictions  
57 ranging from mark making to fully formed images and writing (see Figure 2). The  
58 Talking Circle method where children were invited to walk around the setting -  
59 indoors or outdoors - and then come back and discuss what they had seen with their  
60



educator assisted on focusing on the task and children were able to demonstrate their local knowledge. Children as young as two were able to show in their drawings what they liked to do and older children at the age of three could also identify other experiences and activities they would like to engage with but were not currently provided in their setting. For example, Chelsea at three years of age was able to communicate what she liked to do and what she wanted to be included in the setting that was not currently available. After she drew, the educator scribed the words she said:

**Figure 1.**

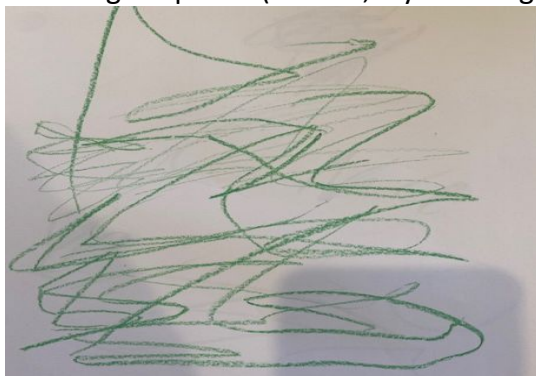
*Drawing Responses (Chelsea, 3 years, Stage 1)*



Johann at two years and four months of age could also represent what he saw on his walk:

**Figure 2.**

*Drawing Response (Johann, 2 years Stage 2)*



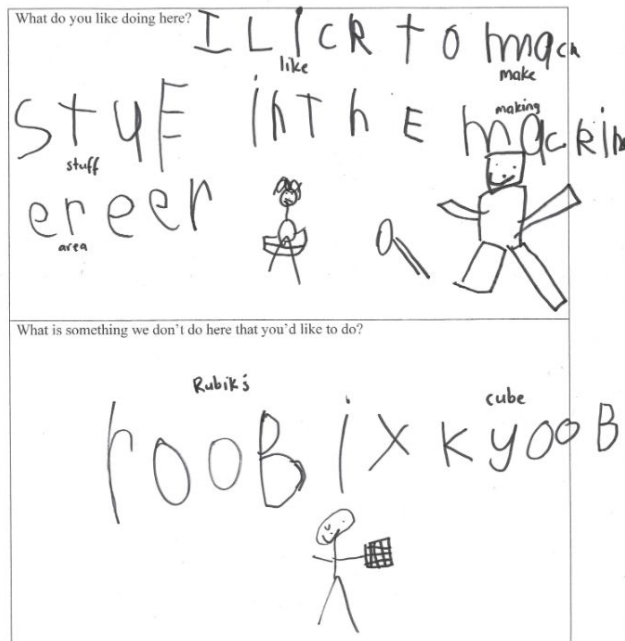
Text reads:

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3 “Johann enjoys going for walks around the garden at daycare”  
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6 Older children wrote their own scripts with some words assisted with educator  
7 annotations, as shown by Xavier.

8 **Figure 3**

9 *Drawing and Written Response (Xavier, 5 years, Stage 1)*  
10



34 The educators in Stage 1 commented that the conversational and drawing prompts  
35 are important features of these methods (see Einarsdóttir et al., 2009) and provided  
36 educators with ways in which to support children being at ease with their efforts to  
37 represent experiences. Johnson et al. (2014) suggests the research context is  
38 important and familiarity with adults asking open-ended questions creates a relaxed  
39 atmosphere to support children's participation. In such scenarios the educator takes  
40 the role of "authentic novice" as someone who is honestly hoping to learn from  
41 children how they observe their environment (Clark, 2010, p. 120). This is  
42 demonstrated in the following examples:  
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45  
46 One child described, "Well, I saw a pretend computer. I saw a cubby house for  
47 playing on. I saw things to make pictures for my mum that are really beautiful. I saw  
48 my friends" (Ava, three- five years group, Talking Circle, Stage 2). Using this method,  
49 a two-year-old was able to contribute his thoughts, he answered, "Walking around  
50 the garden; I find flowers and bugs. I like finding bugs at Leesa's house" (John, two  
51 years and four months, Talking Circle, Stage 2). An educator asked another child  
52 'What's your favourite activity to do?' and the child answered as noted by the  
53 educator: (inside) "The dentist activity." (Outside) "Play in the cubby house with  
54 Tom" (Ava, three- five years group, Talking Circle, Stage 2).  
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56 There are multiple benefits of children's participation using multimodal  
57 methodologies that are well thought out and ethical including the gathering of new  
58 and meaningful data that would not be possible without them (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).  
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Visual elicitation was used in Stage 2 by two educators who used children's drawings from Stage 1 to provide initial focus for Dialogic Drawing conversations. Whilst this method has been effective elsewhere (e.g. Mukherji & Albon, 2018; Dockett et al., 2017; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010), most of the participating educators chose not to adopt this approach. Possible reasons may rest with educators' preference for the other two approaches, or their already well-established relationships with children, thereby negating the need for rapport building when less familiar researcher-child relationships are involved (see Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

### **Appeal to children**

The methods chosen appealed to the children, with some sharing their opinions about participating in the research process. For example, one child said, *"I like you talking to us, you like us talking to you"* (Millie, 4 years). Another stated, *"I like interviews"* (Juliette, 4 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). While another child proffered the view: *"I think educators should ask us lots of things. We know lots of things, I can tell you about things"* (Nate, 4 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). The process of being asked in these ways was a pleasurable experience for many children. One child summed this up by saying, *"I like answering your questions. Can we do this again"* (Annabelle, 5 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). Boyden and Ennew (1997) suggest that most children enjoy using visual research methods. Including information from children about their lives conveys value for the knowledge of their lived experiences and their expertise. Further, the inclusion of conversational and visual representations breaks down potential adult-generated assumptions and places authorship in the hands of children (Halpenny, 2021).

### **Multimodal methodologies and children's participation**

In both stages, the methods used by educators were inclusive of children aged two to five years. It became apparent that missing from our samples across Stage 1 and 2 children were very young children under two and those who could not hold a drawing implement or communicate in ways that educators could understand and record. The six experienced educators who gave feedback on how the prompts were used with children with diverse capabilities reported how they observed and noted children's gestures, actions, expressions in their daily activities, or had prompts translated into children's home languages or dialects. In analysing this data, the same themes were used however this is noted as a limitation and more attention needs to be given to allow better participation of children with diverse capabilities.

The inclusion of infants' and other children who were excluded from using these methodologies would undoubtedly add to perspectives gathered; however, access to and representation of infants' experiences remains problematic. Nevertheless, Pascal and Bertram (2009, p.254) suggest that researchers "recognise the many ways in which children skillfully communicate their realities to us." Sumsion et al (2011) described being mindful of the capacities that infants have in the ways they

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3 communicate their emotional states such as facial expressions, gestures, gaze, eye  
4 contact, vocalisations and body language. However, the ways in which researchers  
5 interpret infants' movements and expressions are open to contestation (see Elwick  
6 et al., 2014; Johanson & Emilson, 2010; Komulainen, 2007). It is apparent that  
7 attempts to 'know' more about infants requires another level of thinking about  
8 participatory methodologies for very young children (Palaiologou, 2013) and ethical  
9 practices (Elwick et al., 2014). For the research team it also meant rethinking  
10 strategies and seeking expert advice on how to collect data from very young  
11 children and children with diverse capabilities in Stage 3 to allow for "plurality,  
12 difference and diversity" (Palaiologou, 2013).  
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### 17 **Children's comments on their experiences**

18 The major benefit of using these multimodal methodologies with children as  
19 reported here in Stage 1 and 2 of the study was that they assisted children to make  
20 valid comments on matters that affect them. In Stage 2 children were asked  
21 questions to think about some of the recommendations identified in the Discussion  
22 paper (Hadley et al., 2021) which were presented in child-friendly prompts. While  
23 some children revisited drawings from Stage 1 as a visual prompt, most children  
24 were asked to create their own drawing and describe it to an educator who scribed  
25 their thoughts.  
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30 For example, in line with the propositions in the ALF Discussion Paper (Hadley et al.,  
31 2021) that a new principle of sustainability be included and strengthened in  
32 Outcome 2 children were asked about why, what and how we should care for the  
33 planet, Jithuki replied: "*We can take care of the planet by keeping it clean and*  
34 *picking up rubbish and planting flowers and plants*" (Jithuki, 3-5 group, Talking  
35 Circle, Stage 2). Another child replied: "*Not putting rubbish in the ocean is*  
36 *important, turtles get stuck in plastic*" (Albert, 4 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). While  
37 another child was able to talk and draw about the recycling methods used at his  
38 centre.  
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### 42 **Figure 4.**

43 *Dialogic Drawing, George (Age 4)*  
44



56 Annotation reads: "This is me, putting the rubbish in the garbage bins. The teachers  
57 help me decide where things go."  
58  
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3 Using multimodal ways of working with children helped to reveal their deeply  
4 personal educational experiences in their early childhood settings and the  
5 importance of their relationships. Children's reflections on their experience tended  
6 to emphasise the importance of nurturing these connections. As one child said, "*So*  
7 *many people, important people to hear. The teachers, my friends we learn together*"  
8 (Zoe, 4 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). These comments were a common thread, for  
9 example: "*I like playing together. How to make things and work together. It's so*  
10 *cool*" (Nicki, 5 years, talking Circle, Stage 2), and "*Our teachers are kind to us. I like*  
11 *playing inside with my friends because they make us happy*" (Remi, 5 years, Talking  
12 Circle, Stage 2).  
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16 Responses to the question '*How does the teacher help you?*' focused on the  
17 educator's role as a knowledgeable and emotionally responsive presence. One child  
18 said: "*Educators help us make things and help us eat. My favourite thing to do is*  
19 *listen to stories*" (Melia, 4 years, Stage 2). Another child replied: "*My teacher is a*  
20 *listening ear*" (Oliver, 5 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). When asked, '*What do you*  
21 *think is the most important thing (your teacher) does here?*' One child answered:  
22 "*My teachers teach me to play. I like playing inside and outside with my toys*" (Alex,  
23 3 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). With another responding: "*Learning is playing. We*  
24 *have grasshoppers and ladybugs in the garden. My teacher helps me learn. I like*  
25 *playing shops inside*" (Harvey, 5 years, Talking Circle, Stage 2). Such methods view  
26 children as knowledge holders as shown here and have been found to promote a  
27 sense of self efficacy in children (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). Using methods such  
28 as these goes in some part to empower children as well as mediate the power  
29 imbalance between adults and children as adults become attentive listeners  
30 (Cartmel & Casley, 2014). Empowering children and mediating the power imbalance  
31 between children and adults reinforces the UNCRC positioning of children as social  
32 actors with agency and the use of democratic participatory approaches in  
33 researching with children.  
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### 41 **Reflecting on using multimodal methodologies to inform policy development**

42 The process and methods used in this project gathered children's views and  
43 experiences to add to other stakeholder data to inform the updating of the EYLF.  
44 Eliciting children's voices to inform policies that affect them has been seen  
45 internationally particularly in Scotland (Borland et al., 2001) and Sweden (Engdahl &  
46 Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2008), and more recently in Australia (Harris & Manatakis, 2013).  
47 Adopting a consultative approach with children has resulted in the design of  
48 curriculum frameworks for older children, resources and proposals valuing  
49 children's participation as "citizens and learners" (Borland et al., 2001; Engdahl &  
50 Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2008; Harris & Manatakis, 2013, p. 9). Recognising the educational  
51 advantages of involving children in decision-making processes, Scotland has taken  
52 the additional step of legislating children's rights in policy to ensure voices are  
53 listened to and quality improvements achieved (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of  
54 Education [HMIe], 2009). As part of these efforts, it would seem paramount that  
55 children's voices assume central importance in educational research when  
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reconsidering existing policies and practices designed to support their participation and learning as active citizens in early childhood settings (Clarke, 2005).

Such consultative approaches have proven immensely promising in influencing decision-making, by connecting children's own findings to key stakeholders and decisions makers. Enabling and using children's input into matters that affect them creates change that leads to better lives for themselves and/or other children (e.g. Cahill, 2007; Houghton, 2015; Skelton, 2008; Tisdall 2018). Further, the use of multimodal methodologies such as those described provide rich sources of data to complement adult centric research data and methods that are not always compatible to what young children deem important (Murray, 2019).

### **Conclusions and future recommendations**

It was the aim of the project to engage with diverse stakeholders and seek multiple voices and diverse perspectives to inform the update of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) by designing and offering methodological tools that provided opportunities for children to contribute. The children's self-described ideas and experiences in their ECEC settings became core to the work being completed for the national ALFs project. Adding to the richness of scholarship researching *with* children, rather than *on* children, this project highlights the potential of research using multimodal methods for actively promoting children's agency and engaging their voices to influence policy formation. Further, such framing ensures the involvement of sometimes excluded populations such as children who can produce knowledge from their own accounts, as well as addressing the inequality of adult knowledge creation (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). A further step, to strengthen children's agency by involving them in the data analysis, would have been desirable, however the tight timeframes of the project precluded this opportunity.

Areas of future research include the further investigation of researching with infants and young toddlers. This is an area of pressing need, as seen in some emerging studies (eg. Salamon & Harrison, 2015). The importance of capturing pre-verbal children's voices was a focus of discussion within the research team as articulating this approach with educators is complex and required further consideration for Stage 3. Further work is also needed around creating prompts and questions to assist educators to use the multimodal methods offered by the project. Educators have established relationships with children and are in the best position to use such methods in ethical ways. Their knowledge of individual children enables them to adapt these methods to include diverse children in meaningful and authentic ways. This project has contributed to knowledge and practices of consulting children regarding policy matters that affect their lived experiences of ECEC.

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