Eliciting Looked After Children's Views and Relationships Through Card-based Participatory Research Methods

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This brief report discusses the usefulness of "ranking and ratings" cards in the context of participatory research with looked-after children. Within this research, we draw upon notions of participation as outlined in the UNCRC. We undertook participatory research to elicit the voices of looked after children, aged 6 to 11 years, who were involved in a school-based creative mentoring intervention. The researchers created a "ranking and ratings" card based upon the popular game "Top Trumps" to create familiarity and facilitate an examination of mentor-mentee relationships through focused conversations. We found that children's interactions with the cards stimulated conversations which were open and detailed. This was of particular value for conducting participatory research with marginalized children who may not otherwise necessarily engage in research with an unfamiliar adult.

Introduction

Previous research has highlighted how looked after children are often marginalized and lack involvement in decisions about their lives (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Mannay et al., 2017). Looked after children are defined as being under the care of their Local Authority, which places them with a foster family, in a residential school or children's home, according to English law under the Children Act 1989. In 2018/2019 there were approximately 102,000 looked after children in the UK (Department for Education, 2019; NSPCC, 2021). When in care, children are routinely assigned into a "failing" subject position and, unsurprisingly, they experience poorer educational outcomes (Mannay et al., 2017). In response to this observed attainment gap, looked after children have access to intervention and support through funding from their Local Authority. Within this report we refer to a funded creative mentoring intervention as one example of support provided to looked after children.

Gaskell (2010) suggests that many looked after children feel that adults in authority positions, such as social workers, do not listen or respond to their needs. This is persistent despite a growth in emphasis upon "participation rights" as outlined in the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC). For example, the best interests of the child must be enacted in all decisions (Article 3), with children having the right to be heard and their

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views given due weight (Article 12). There is also a growing body of child-led participatory research with a focus upon securing such rights (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Tisdall, 2015a, 2015b). Participatory research has been applied to elicit the voices of children who face complex challenges in their daily lives (Abebe, 2009). This form of research can potentially enable looked-after children to elicit their views, as they can express themselves in forms that do not require strong literacy skills (Kendrick et al., 2008). Within this research, we draw upon notions of participation as outlined in the UNCRC. This report highlights the usefulness of Participatory Research Methods (PRM) to elicit looked after children's views on a creative mentoring program. The PRM were applied as one part of an evaluation to ascertain whether the program is delivering an effective child-centered intervention, and considers how it could be further improved or extended.

Participatory research with children

All too often, children in popular discourses are portrayed as "human becomings" and not as "human beings"—this makes them recipients of power without agency (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 639). Although common within child development perspectives, such approaches have been criticized for falsely presenting a universal, "normal" childhood premised upon linear notions of development (James et al., 1998). This "ideal" version is far from the experience of many children, particularly for looked-after children. In contrast, a well-established (and now extensive) body of work known as the "New Sociology of Childhood" brings together empirical studies from across the social sciences to define children as agents in their own lives (James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005). From this perspective, children are understood to develop their own identities and viewpoints as well as to be competent in dealing effectively with day-to-day issues (Prout, 2002). Children are not understood merely as the passive recipients of adult interventions, but as empowered social actors bringing about societal futures and shaping their own lives (Diuk, 2013).

Numerous PRM have been created in response to the "New Sociology of Childhood" literature and the development of children's participative rights through the UNCRC. PRM aim to facilitate full participation in research processes and practices (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020) with specific methods designed to elicit the voices of children and young people (Pain, 2004). Other research methods, including questionnaires and interviews, can often reinforce unequal child-adult power relations. At times, this creates compliance effects on children's responses (Pain, 2004; Procter & Hatton, 2015). PRM can enable children to be involved in the co-creation of research and empower them to present their perspectives through a range of mediums, including art-based activities (Blaisdell et al., 2019), map-making (Gowers, 2021) and photography (Aldridge, 2012). PRM artifacts can facilitate conversation and enable examination of children's meaning-making and experiences. For example, the multi-method Mosaic approach combines map-making, walking tours, and interviews (Clark, 2017). Clark (2011) describes the map-texts as "multi-

layered artefacts" which provide a starting point for further dialogue. Similarly, Mannay et al. (2017) used a sandboxing method whereby looked-after children represented their aspirations and potential futures in sand trays. Their views were subsequently explored through interviews. The authors found that the creation of visual artefacts enabled participants to lead the research and engage with it on their own terms (Mannay et al., 2017).

Card-Based Participatory Research Methods

We developed a card-based PRM to elicit children's views and will now briefly explore the related literature. The use of cards as a PRM usually involves ranking and scoring issues that are related to the life experiences of children or young people (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018; Hill et al., 2016; MacKenzie et al., 2020). These card-based PRM ask children and young people to take part in ordering activities broadly with the aim of examining the influence of social phenomena, such as identities, structural barriers, and well-being. Previous card-based PRM have involved children from highly vulnerable groups including street children (Malcomson & Bradford, 2018), and those with additional needs or disabilities using photographic and image-based cards (Hill et al., 2016; MacKenzie et al., 2020). For example, Malcolmson and Bradford (2018) explored street children's relationships with others in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Children generated cards with statements about their relationships, sorting them into categories and then ranking them according to risk. Many card-based participatory activities are used in conjunction with other research methods, particularly as part of participatory diagramming whereby cards are placed within a predesigned diagram (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018; MacKenzie et al., 2020; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2019). Consequently, the use of card-based PRMs presents itself as a means to elicit children's views surrounding their relationships and experiences with others.

The Creative Mentoring Program

We designed "ranking and ratings" cards as an elicitation tool within a wider project to evaluate the provision of a Creative Mentoring program for looked-after children within two pilot primary schools. The program was run in England by a Local Authority and a charitable organization with the aim of nurturing social skills through creative arts. The core philosophy of the program was to apply a "social pedagogy" to support children to overcome or manage the challenges that they experience (Nunn et al., 2021).

Six children across two primary schools were partnered with an individual mentor: a freelance creative arts practitioner with experience of working with children. The schools arranged the mentor-mentee pairing to match the skills held by the mentor to the individual child's strengths, interests, and needs. The mentors delivered an individualized one-to-one program in school which took place as 12–16 sessions from April to July 2021. The 1–2-hour sessions took place weekly, were co-designed with children and included drama, dance, music, cooking, imaginative play, drawing, model-making, and storytelling. The overarching aim of Creative Mentoring is to support the participant to

Table 1. Overview of participant details.

Primary school setting 1	
Male	6 years old
Female	8 years old
Female	10 years old
Primary school setting 2	
Male	8 years old
Male	8 years old
Female	10 years old

safely explore their locality, learn new skills, and communicate their emotions. The relationship between the mentor and the child is seen as fundamental to the Creative Mentoring program.

The evaluation was commissioned by the Local Authority, who funded the mentoring sessions with the goal of enhancing and extending the program in other primary schools. The university has a long-standing relationship with the Local Authority and has undertaken previous evaluative research on the program in other settings (Nunn et al., 2021). The researchers involved in the development of the PRM had no pre-existing relationship with the mentors or either school. As part of the wider evaluation, six school staff and three creative mentors took part in semi-structured interviews to support the evaluation of the organization and delivery of the program. To ensure children's views informed the evaluation, PRMs were used to capture their perspectives on the mentee-mentor relationship and the perceived influenced on their school and home lives.

Research approach

A participatory research approach was taken during the research activity. Six children aged 6–11 years (three male, three female) participated from two primary schools and shared their perspectives on the Creative Mentoring program (see Table 1). The children who participated were the only looked-after children attending each of the two schools. Consideration was given to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines in addition to institutional ethics and integrity processes. After gaining written consent from gatekeepers, including the school setting, educators, and caregivers, the children were informed about the study's aims, what participation might involve, and their right to withdraw (Dockett et al., 2012).

The children were invited to take part in the research as part of a group of three. This allowed for peer support while also giving each member to make in-depth contributions if they wished. The PRM activity, including the creation of the cards and focused conversation, lasted for approximately one hour. The activity took place within a familiar room in the school building, outside of the classroom space, with a familiar member of the school staff present. This allowed for further participant support and activity scaffolding if required. This approach was chosen to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere in which the children would feel comfortable to respond. The purpose of the

activity was explained verbally to the children, who indicated their verbal consent to participate. Informed consent was also sought from the child's caregiver and the school leadership team acted as gatekeepers. Throughout the activity, the researcher attended to signs of ongoing assent.

Ranking and Ratings Card

During the research, participants were invited to create an individual "ranking and ratings" card. The cards were designed by the research team to explore children's views on the mentoring intervention and the relationship they had with their individual mentor. Drawing materials and an A4 card template were provided to each participant. The template was based upon a familiar card game,"Top Trumps," which features a brief biography of a character with a numerical rating for a listed set of skills, attributes, and special abilities. Each of our "ranking and ratings" cards emulated this structure and featured a space for the child to record their mentor's name, draw a picture of them, and identify three words to describe them. Participants instantly recognized the format of the cards and children were able to fill them out independently. The session was audio recorded to capture children's task-based utterances and narratives.

The cards included a numerical scale from 1 to 10 allowing participants to identify characteristics that they felt were important in their relationship and the extent to which they felt their mentor displayed this. To aid accessibility, a traffic light system—as applied in design research with children (Yusoff et al., 2011)—was devised. This featured a scale from *red* (1), to signify weaknesses, to *green* (10), to signify strengths. It was anticipated that this would allow children to draw comparisons between their mentor and other adults in their lives as well as enabling reflection upon the supportive qualities for the mentee-mentor relationship. To model the use of the scale, the terms "listening" and "knowledge" were pre-typed onto the card, and the children were asked to rate how good their mentor was at these. As children are familiar with the concept of "good listening" and "knowledge" through their experiences in school, these terms were selected as examples of characteristics a mentor could have. It was further explained that a characteristic was a "special ability" or "skill" a person could have, with this definition chosen to match the language used with the Top Trumps game. The children were then directed to select three more characteristics their mentor displayed and assign a rating for each using the scale.

As the children completed their cards, their task-based narratives gave valuable insight into the written information recorded onto the cards and the justifications they gave for these. This is demonstrated in [Figure 1](#) where the cards are created alongside excerpts from the audio transcripts. The content of the audio transcripts was particularly valuable where it provided additional detail to complement the short, written records made by children.
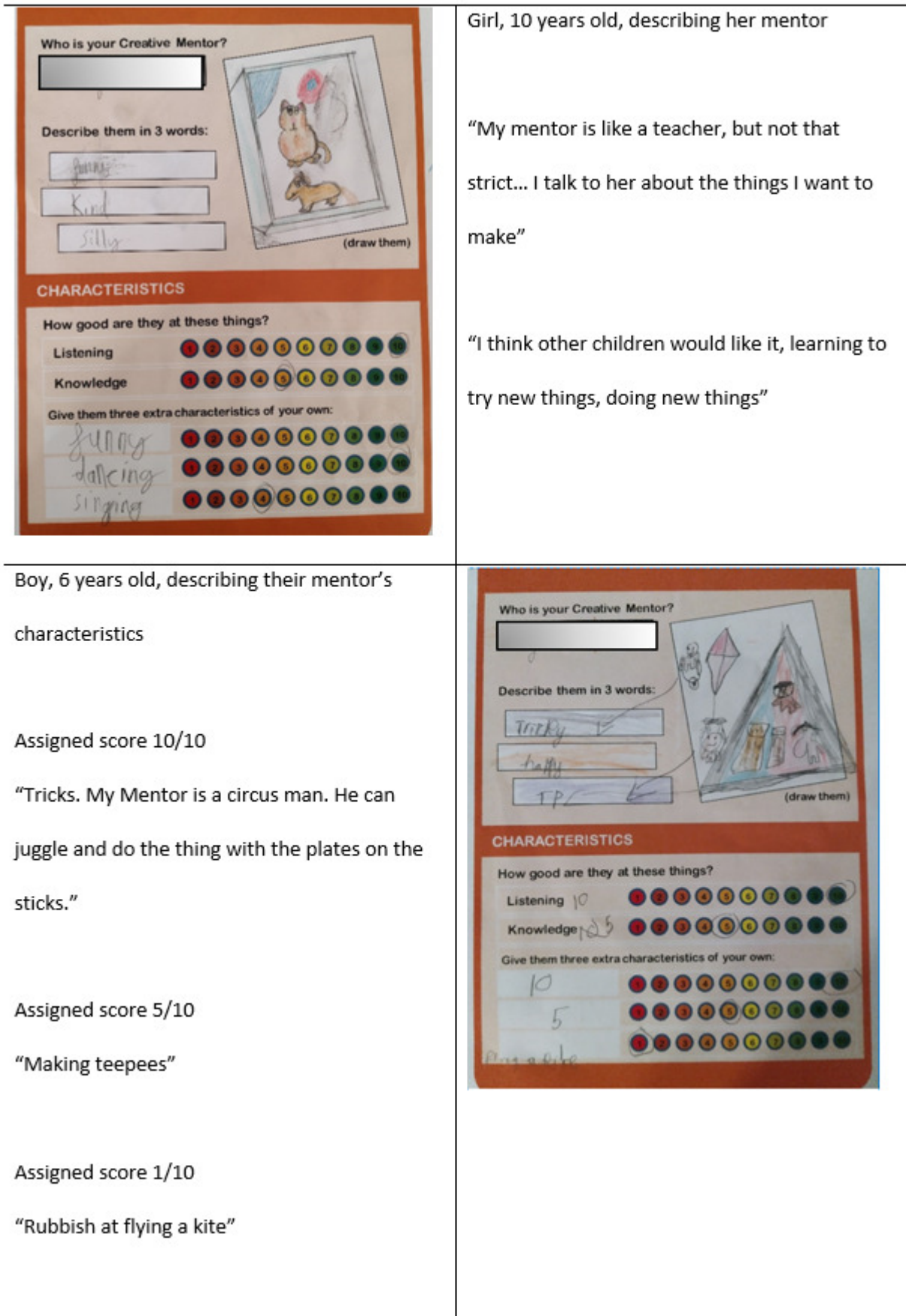
Girl, 10 years old, describing her mentor

"My mentor is like a teacher, but not that strict... I talk to her about the things I want to make"

"I think other children would like it, learning to try new things, doing new things"

Boy, 6 years old, describing their mentor's characteristics

Assigned score 10/10

"Tricks. My Mentor is a circus man. He can juggle and do the thing with the plates on the sticks."

Assigned score 5/10

"Making teepees"

Assigned score 1/10

"Rubbish at flying a kite"

Figure 1. Cards created by girl, 10 years old (top), and boy, 6 years old (bottom), alongside their task-based narratives.

Table 2. Excerpt from focused conversation schedule.

Starting question	Follow up prompts and probes where appropriate
Can you tell me about your mentor?	What is their name?
	How long have you been meeting with them?
	How were you introduced to your mentor?
	What is the best thing about your mentor?
	Is there anything you would change about your mentor?
	How does your mentor help/support you?
What parts of Creative Mentoring do you enjoy the most?	Which parts are the most fun?
	Which parts are the most helpful? Why?
	Do you think other children would like this part of Creative Mentoring? Why?
Are there any things you find difficult about Creative Mentoring?	What was difficult/hard?
	Can you describe what happened?
	How did you solve this problem?
	Did your mentor help you solve this?
	Did another adult help you to solve this? Which adult?

Focused Conversations

Once the cards were completed, the participants engaged in a focused conversation (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). The group reflected upon their experiences with their individual mentor during the program. The conversation was led by a researcher who asked a series of questions to elicit responses that began with descriptions of the pictures drawn on their cards. An excerpt from the focused conversation starter questions and follow up prompts is shown in Table 2.

Within conversation, the researcher posed further open-ended questions related to the child's engagement and relationship with their mentor. Justification and reasoning for the characteristics and ratings children had assigned were also explored. The final part of the focused conversation explored the impact of the mentor-mentee relationship upon other aspects children's lives. In common with Canning and Patterson (2020), who used prompt cards alongside narrative elaboration with vulnerable children, we found this approach facilitated children to answer openly and in depth.

Approach to Data Analysis

Visual data from the cards is collected alongside audio data drawn from focused conversation and task-based utterances. The two data sources were seen as complementary components in common with the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017). Flick asserts that thematic analysis is "founded on analysing subjective viewpoints," (2014, p. 423), a factor which reflects PRM's central aim to articulate young children's perspectives on their mentoring experiences. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 82) approach to thematic analysis, the

presence of a "patterned response or meaning" can be explored for each child's card and conversation. Following this, comparisons can be drawn across the two groups of children who participated. For example, a child might verbally refer to talking about their feelings with their mentor while the card produced by another child may rate their mentor highly for their listening skills. The themes from across the visual and audio data may then be compiled and reduced to determine the main themes.

Reflections

In developing the card-based PRM, we sought to uphold children's participation rights as outlined within the UNCRC. In recognition of Article 3 and 12, we identified that children's views regarding the mentoring program should be captured to inform the evaluation of the program and decisions made regarding their potential future involvement.

We feel that the card-making activities aided children's participation because these activities followed the structure and format of a familiar game. The children seemed to become more relaxed and at ease once introduced to the cards. Children initiated conversations about the Top Trumps card games they had played before and how much they enjoyed it. This familiarity with the style of the game allowed for children to grow in their confidence, especially as it did not require or privilege strong literacy skills. Also, the activity mirrored the creative approach and expressive media used in mentoring sessions. This was important in building trust with the children, as they did not feel like they were being tested. Trust-building is not easy and is particularly important for looked-after children whose previous experience of adults is rarely positive.

We recognize the limits to participation present in our PRM as the children were only involved in the data collection stage of the research. Although we believe that the children enjoyed using the card-based templates, it is not known whether this format would have been chosen by the children had they been given greater involvement in the research design. In taking the card-based PRM forward, we would like to give children greater opportunity in designing their own format for recording their perceived relationships with familiar adults. It could be that children draw upon their knowledge of other popular games as a preferred means of recording an individual's features and characteristics. Equally, it could be that the children do not feel that an adult's personal characteristics are their most noteworthy feature and so choose to record different information about their relationship. This would allow children to move from being research participants towards being co-researchers (see Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). The approach taken in the card-based PRM described in this report was limited by timescales, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which restricted our in-person school visits, and the scope of the evaluation project. Therefore, we negotiated our response to allow us to take the strongest participatory approach that we could within the context of the evaluation.

Throughout the research activity, we sought to listen to the different communicative forms children used to ensure that their voices and perspectives were included in the evaluation. Within our approach, the notion of voice extended to drawing, gestures, and task-based utterances as well as spoken and written forms of communication. The ethics of our position were guided by being as attuned as possible to the interests, communicative preferences, and lives of the children we worked with. For this study, it was not possible to involve the children as co-researchers in planning the activity to match their pre-existing interests. Instead, we had to rely upon conversations with school-based staff to gain information about the children prior to the research session. We recognize that this is problematic and can reinforce adult-child power relations whereby the adult is deemed to know the child best; this denies children the agency to present their lives in their own terms.

In spite of these limitations, we felt that the use of "ranking and ratings" cards supported the researcher's positionality in the activity as an interested adult who wanted to listen and learn more about children's lives. We perceived a minimizing of power-relations at the beginning of the session with the introduction of the cards as the children became experts. Children explained how the cards worked to the researcher, and the researcher became the learner. We also found that children directed their own interactions with the cards, as they often began to fill in the cards independently and not always in the order that the card was presented. However, it is important to acknowledge that the positive response of participants is not solely due to the PRM but reflects the foundational work of the mentors who created a safe environment for the children to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

Conclusion and Future Research: Doing More to Shift Power Dynamics

We found the card-based PRM to be effective in eliciting the views of looked-after children. We feel it facilitated open and detailed conversations with participants about their experiences of creative mentoring and their mentee-mentor relationships. This technique could be usefully applied to other research contexts with children where there is familiarity with Top Trumps-style card games. This research method appears particularly effective when conducting research with children who are marginalized and would not necessarily engage in research with an unfamiliar adult.

We wish to highlight that more could have been done to further aid participation and challenge adult-child power dynamics. The cards and associated activities were designed by adult researchers arguably leading to what Punch refers to as methods that are "research-participant-centered" rather than "child-centered" (2002, p. 337). Failing to involve children and young people in the design of PRM could potentially reinforce adult power dynamics and insert adult assumptions about how children elicit their views (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In future studies, we would involve children and young people in the design of the cards as co-researchers, drawing upon the approaches utilized by Lundy and McEvoy (2012).

We believe that there is scope to bring the card-based approach into a wider suite of PRM, as seen in the Mosaic approach, to involve children more fully in the research (Clark, 2017). One of the key aspects of the Mosaic approach we would draw upon is reflection, whereby participants gather an array of documentation about their creative mentoring experiences. This would enable them to undertake an analysis of the breadth of their experiences so they "see in different ways" (Clark, 2011, p. 323). Overall, the card-based PRM offers an engaging game-based approach to elicit children's perspectives on their relationships with familiar adults. It could be further developed through co-design with children and young people to uphold their right to be heard in matters affecting their everyday lives and to contribute to the wider suite of PRM.

Conflicts of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Supplementary Materials

Figure 1

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Figure 1

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