Methods and Ethics in Qualitative Research Exploring Young Children's Voice: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Young children have rights; they are agents and active constructors of their social worlds. Despite well-established theoretical foundations, the 'methods' and 'ethics' of qualitative research to elicit young children's voice require further exploration to ensure young children are central to our research endeavors. This systematic review examined studies that sought to capture young children's (3–6 years) voice in Early Childhood Education and Care settings. Fifty-eight studies met the inclusion criteria. Interview was found to be the most common strategy; this is often coupled with other child-friendly methods. Findings suggest that young children are increasingly listened to; however, there appears to be a need to further promote children's agency and the inclusion of assent-seeking as an ongoing process. Gaps in methods supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs and Indigenous children are also evident. In addition, advancing non-permanent methods of meaning making to support children's participation appears ripe for methodological innovation.

Keywords

child voice, research with children, informed assent, early childhood education and care

Young children have historically been viewed as vulnerable and dependent on the adults that care for them. As a result, their perspectives have not been captured in research to the same extent as older children or adults. Over the past three decades, increasing attention on the rights of children (United Nations, 1989, 2005, 2021), recognition of children as active social actors and agents from a Sociology of Childhood perspective (Corsaro, 2005; James & James, 2008; Mayall, 2002), evolving understanding of child development from a post-developmental paradigm (Edwards, 2003; Wiegerová & Gavora, 2015), and child-centered pedagogy (e.g., Malaguzzi, 1993) in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has cemented notions of listening to young children in matters affecting them. Researchers have increasingly recognized and valued the perspectives that young children can offer as unique experiencers of their own lives (Christensen, 2004; Clark, 2005).

Young children's participation in ECEC programs has increased significantly over the last two decades (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021). In OECD countries, an average of 83% children aged 3 to 5-years attend ECEC (OECD, 2021), while in the United States, 40% of 3- to 4-year-old children and 84% of 5-year-old children attend ECEC (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The high levels of participation in early learning programs and philosophical shift towards viewing and respecting children as active participants in society highlight the importance of listening to all children's voices within ECEC settings. Between 3 and 6 years of age, many children experience rapid

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development in their language and speech skills, with strengthening ability to construct and comprehend complex sentences (Fellowes & Oakley, 2014). Children not only hold views and perspectives, but are capable of expressing them (Dayan & Ziv, 2012). However, despite growing recognition of the importance of capturing children's voice, the "how to" regarding methods and ethics of research with children remains unclear (Fane et al., 2016); more work is needed to ensure children are listened to in the conduct or practice of research (Swauger et al., 2017), especially when the research involves young children (3–6 years of age).

Children's voice, in this review, refers to children's expression, perspectives, experiences, attitudes, views, and beliefs that are expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication. To capture the "voice" of children, children need to be positioned in the center of the research, as participants and subjects. However, empirical research involving young children often do not reflect these widely acknowledged beliefs about researching with children. For example, Mayne and Howitt's (2015) meta-analysis of 506 peer-reviewed articles found a considerable under-reporting of ethical procedures, indicating a gap between rights-based 'researching with children' early childhood literature (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2011) and the way in which research is being reported as conducted with young children. Despite the well-established arguments for engaging children's voices in research, there appears to be practical challenges, raising the importance of understanding power imbalance, child agency, and informed assent in more effectively researching with children.

The notion of the "voice" is deeply connected to power, and the use of methods which challenge the traditionally disempowered social position of young children. A growing body of research proposes that researchers adopt a more dynamic and relational understanding of power and voice, and how they intersect with methods (Davidson, 2017; Gallagher, 2019). To examine if research has supported children's participation, the social relations between those involved, the ways the methods are practiced, and extent to which individual capacity, preference, and social conditions are observed and accounted for are significant.

The primary ethical challenge is to find ways of addressing the asymmetry of power and status between adults and children (Matthews, 2001; Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2021). Traditionally, researchers have held more power than children as they decided the aims, methods, analysis, and interpretation of the knowledge during the research process (Gallagher, 2008). It is important to note that such decisions are likewise determined by cultural beliefs and/or assumptions concerning epistemology and ontology in the conduct of research itself and can therefore position children as 'other', reinscribing problems of centralized cultural normativity (Henry & Pene, 2001). However, the researching with children movement attempts to describe a more collaborative relationship between researchers and children to decenter adult power.

Recognizing that power differentials can exist in research with children, means that respecting the agency of children has evolved as a mechanism for mediating these differentials in practice (Woodhead, 2005). Child agency is situated within the cultural, contextual, and relationships between children and various other kinds of beings (Abebe, 2019; Gallagher, 2019). As children's agency increases, power moves between researchers and participants. Allowing children to contribute to the research agenda, the space and time to share what is most important to them and creating an environment where there are no right or wrong answers can assist in the sharing of power (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998).

Such research that seeks to acknowledge children's rights and promote their agency highlights the significance of seeking children's assent. Authentic participation of children requires clear understanding of what they are doing, voluntary contribution, and informed decision-making (Chawla, 2002). Seeking agreement from children is advocated as essential and increasingly practiced by researchers (Dockett & Perry, 2011; Spriggs, 2010). This normally takes the form of assent instead of consent. Assent refers to children's clear agreement to participate in the research process (Cocks, 2006). Striving to seek informed assent from young children is an aspect of respecting their rights and competencies as social agents and decision makers (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Differentiated from informed consent by adults, no signature is required for assent (Spriggs, 2010), though may be practiced as a child-friendly way (e.g., assent picture book in Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Providing children with detailed and sufficient information in a format they can understand will assist them to understand the purpose of the research and what to expect (Mishna et al., 2004). Furthermore, gaining assent should not be a one-off event, but instead an ongoing process (Spriggs, 2010). Children have the right to participate in and withdraw from research at any point. It is the researchers' responsibility to ensure children's ongoing assent throughout the study, be aware of and sensitively respond to any indications of dissent, however subtle (Cocks, 2006). Obtaining assent from children as an ongoing process can also serve as a reminder for researchers to always treat children with respect and dignity, with decision-making rights and competencies.

To our knowledge, only one review exploring qualitative research methods with children has focused on young children under 7 years of age (Urbina-Garcia, 2019). This study captured papers published within a 3-year window (2015–2018), with a focus on methodological strategies only (Urbina-Garcia, 2019). More recently, Montreuil et al.'s (2021) review sought to identify approaches and ethical practices used to engage children aged 12 and below in participatory research, uncovering only 12% ($n = 7$) of studies conducted in ECEC settings. The paucity of research synthesis that focuses on young children is evident.
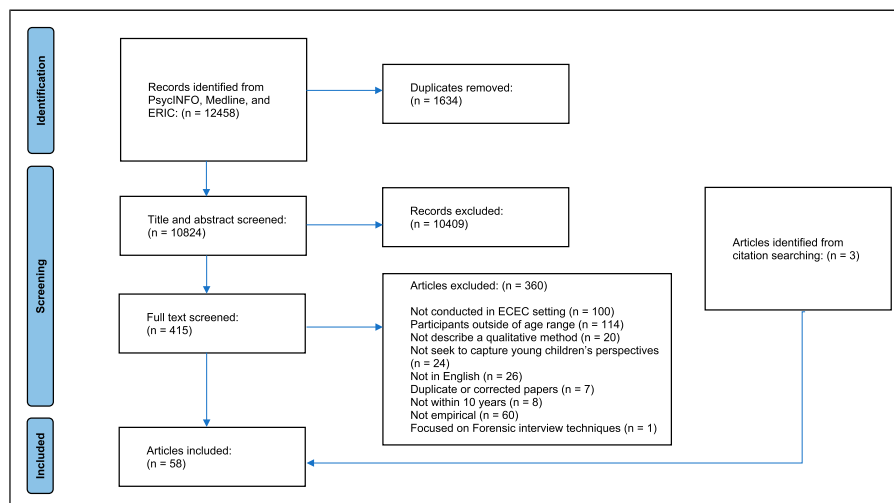
Figure 1. PRISMA chart.

This review built on previous work to examine the data collection methods, and ethical considerations in child voice research, with a focus on young children. Meanwhile, the application and outcome of research methods to listen to children can vary based on context (Frauenberger et al., 2011); similarly, ethical considerations differ across settings. This review specifically focuses on research undertaken in ECEC environments, including long day care, kindergarten, preschool, early learning centers, and/or childcare centers in which young children aged 3 to 6 years are cared for and educated by ECEC staff (OECD, 2021, p. 158). The aim of this review was therefore to explore the following two research questions: (1) What qualitative data collection methods have been used to explore the beliefs, perspectives, experiences, views, thoughts, and/or feelings of young children? (2) How do researchers deal with ethical challenges (i.e., power imbalance, agency, informed assent) involved in research with children in practice?

Methods

Search Strategy

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the recommendations and standards set by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021). In May 2021 and July 2022, a comprehensive search of three computerized databases, PsycINFO, MEDLINE Complete, and ERIC, was conducted to identify the relevant literature. The full search strategy is included in Table S1. Hand searching of reference lists of included articles identified additional studies.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Research with children is growing and nuanced, informing diverse methodological perspectives and methods to explore different research questions. This review focuses on studies that explicitly sought to capture young children's perspectives, experiences, or beliefs on matters pertaining to their lives. Articles were included in this review if they met the following criteria: (a) peer-reviewed papers in English; (b) published between January 2011 and July 2022; (c) included participants aged between 3 and 6 years; (d) qualitative or mixed-method study including qualitative methods; (e) data collection methods were designed to capture children's voice or perspective; and (f) conducted in an ECEC setting.

Articles were excluded if they were (a) published in a language other than English; (b) focused on children younger than 3 years or older than 6 years; (c) conducted in settings other than ECEC, including home, hospital, clinic, or other community settings; (d) did not explicitly seek to capture young children's perspectives, experiences or beliefs; (e) did not describe a qualitative method; and (f) did not include empirical data, including discussion papers, reviews, conference abstracts, books, book chapters, conference posters, or other grey literature.

Screening and Study Selection

The search terms yielded 12,458 results. Citations for all the articles were exported to Covidence software and 1634 duplicates were removed. Two authors (YS & CB) reviewed these studies against the inclusion and exclusion criteria at each step of the process; conflicts were discussed, and 100% agreement was achieved after discussion. Title and abstract screening excluded 10,409 studies, with the remaining 415 papers read in full to determine eligibility. Fifty-five studies included in the review. Hand searching of citations identified an additional three eligible studies, resulting in 58 studies captured in the review (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Quality Appraisal Tool.

Items	Yes No Unclear
Q1. Is there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	
Q2. Is there a theoretical framework that underpin the study?	
Q3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	
Q4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	
Q5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	
Q6. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	
Q7. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	
Q8. Was there rapport building prior to the study?	
Q9. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	
Q10. Is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	
Q11. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	
Q12. Has the informed assent from children been sought?	

Data Extraction

Data were extracted from each study by the first author (YS) and cross checked by the second author (CB). Extracted data included study characteristics (year of publication, geographical location, research aim), study design (theoretical framework, inclusion of literature review, study type), participant characteristics (sample size, age, gender, racial/ethnic composition, additional needs), methodology (sampling approach, methods, type of questions [where applicable], location of the study, scaffolding from caregivers/teachers, data analysis methods, triangulation, findings), reflexivity and ethical considerations (rapport building, consideration of relationship between researcher and children, evidence of ethics approval, parental consent, child assent, confidentiality and anonymity), and any strengths and limitations of the selected methods reported by the researchers.

Quality Appraisal

While this review is not focused on synthesizing the findings of included studies, the quality of each study was assessed to examine the practice of recent research with children. Based on a systematic review examining quality appraisal tools for qualitative studies (Majid & Vanstone, 2018), three relevant tools were identified: (1) Jonna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (JBI, 2020); (2) Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018); and (3) Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). To address the review questions, the most relevant appraisal items from JBI, CASP, and COREQ were identified and combined, with one additional item added "Has the informed assent from children been sought?" The quality assessment tool consisted of 12 items (Table 1). One author (YS) and a trained PhD-level research assistant appraised 11 studies (20%) independently with 92% inter-rater reliability, meetings were held to discuss the discrepancy and reached 100%

agreement. One author (YS) then appraised the remaining papers.

Results

Characteristics of the Includes Studies

Studies included in this review were conducted in: Turkey (14), the United States (11), Australia (6), China (4), England (4), Sweden (4), Finland (3), New Zealand (3), Norway (3), Canada (2), Germany (2), Malta (2), Singapore (2), Brazil (1), Greece (1), Iceland (1), Indonesia (1), Japan (1), Korea (1), Slovenia (1), South Africa (1), and The Czech Republic (1). Forty-nine studies (84%) were published between 2015 and 2022, with the remaining published between 2011 and 2014. All included studies were conducted in center-based ECEC settings. A wide range of topics were explored, including play (reference number in Table 2: 10, 18, 36, 49, 58), children's experiences of ECEC (8, 24, 27), rules (6, 17, 37), friendship (21, 40), inclusion (46), popular culture (44), diet and activity (57), wellbeing (26), participation (48), use of public space (16), and divorce (55). Multiple data collection methods were used to capture children's beliefs, perspectives, experiences, views, thoughts, and/or feelings. A summary of the basic characteristics of the included studies is shown in Table 2.

Few studies (*n* = 4) included children with additional needs or described how they sought to capture these young children's voice in ECEC settings. Coad et al. (2020) explored the perspectives of children with speech and language needs by using innovative head-mounted cameras worn by children and supported by field notes. Pascal and Bertram (2021) included children with special educational needs, yet no methodology to facilitate these children's participation were described. Hanline and Silvia (2012) focused on exploring the social experiences of preschoolers with severe disabilities in an inclusive ECEC setting. Both children with additional needs and typically developing preschoolers were included in this

Table 2. Characteristics of the Included Studies.

Year		First author	Country	Topic	Sample size	Data-collection methods
2022	1	Cetin	Turkey	Artist	10	Drawing + interview
	2	Grano	Finland	Fairy tale and music	15	Draw-and-tell
	3	Parlakyildiz	Turkey	Reality	101	Drawing + interview
	4	Theodosiadou	Greece	TV	70	Drawing + accompanying narrative
2021	5	Akman	Turkey	Rights	69	Interview
	6	Bayrak	Turkey	Rule	235	Interview
	7	Farrugia	Malta	Technology	1	Photos (by family) + interview
	8	Pascal	England, Scotland, New Zealand	Covid-19 experience	58	Multi-methods: Oral narratives, drawings, photographic storyboards, digital documentation, role play sequences, conversations, etc.
	9	Spiteri	Malta	Environment protection	12	Observation + individual interview + puppetry + draw-and-tell
2020	10	Bay	Turkey	Play preference	80	Draw-and-tell
	11	Coad	England	Activities that support needs	24	Multi-methods: Play-based activities, FN, film
	12	Cooke	Australia	Relaxation	46	Drawing-prompted group interview
	13	Kucukturan	Turkey	Street	24	Interview + drawing + concept map + model forming
	14	Payne	U.S.	Civic action	52	Video-cued ethnographic methods (videorecording + FG)
	15	Pranoto	Indonesia	Happiness	353	Individual interview + face-scale
	16	Templeton	U.S.	Public space	11	Photography + photo-elicitation interview + Audiencings
	17	Yildiz	Turkey	Rules	14	Individual interview + drawing
2019	18	Keung	HK China	Play	NR	Observation + FG
	19	Kim	Canada	Outdoor play pedagogical documentation	6	Observation + individual interview
	20	Mertala	Finland	Digital game	26	Drawing + conversational discussion
	21	Oh	U.S.	Friendship	2	Participant observation + video-cued child interview + FN
	22	Rashedi	U.S.	Yoga intervention	154	Interview + GT
	23	Ree	Norway	Hallmarks	12	GI
	24	Şahin-Sak	Turkey	School experience	287	Interview
	25	Wiseman	Australia	Activity preference	29	Draw-and-tell
2018	26	Fane	Australia	Wellbeing	78	Emoji in FG Interview
	27	Ferreira	Brazil, Finland	ECEC experience	40	Photographs taken by children + GI
	28	Golden	U.S.	Princess	31	Pretend-play observation + individual interview
	29	McCormick	U.S.	Care	15	The Mosaic Approach: Observations + informal conversations + photographs + videos + interview
	30	Taş	Turkey	Playmate preference	17	Observation + individual interview
	31	Ünlü-Çetin	Turkey	Father involvement	40	Interview + drawing + ordering
2017	32	Deans	Australia	SEL	38	Teacher-researchers' program & reflective journal notes + drawing-tellings + interview
	33	Yıldız	Turkey	Sustainable development	17	Interview
	34	Helgeland	Norway	Bullying	31 Interviewed, 142 Observed	FG + individual interview + observations
	35	Izumi-Taylor	U.S. & Taiwan China	Tidy-up	50	Interview
	36	Izumi-Taylor	Japan & Korea	Play	100	Photo-elicitation interview
	37	Ólafsdóttir	Iceland	Rules	52	Video-stimulated accounts (Video-record children's play + children to watch and discuss)
	38	Sezgin	Turkey	Humor	52	Drawing + interview

Table 2. (continued)

Year		First author	Country	Topic	Sample size	Data-collection methods
2016	39	Gunes	Turkey	Dream school	45	Drawing + interview
	40	Carter	England	Friendship	7	Multi-methods: Individual & GI + role-play interview + drawing + persona doll scenarios
	41	Nortjé	South Africa	Connectedness	15	Interview + observation + journal of insights & reflections + drawing
2015	42	Almqvist	Sweden	Empowerment	25	Multi-method: GI with puppets & scenarios + photo-elicitation interview
	43	Gunindi	Turkey	Affection	199	Draw-and-explain
	44	Henward	U.S.	Popular culture	NR	Participant observation + interviews (formal & informal) + FG + document collection
	45	Jug	Slovenia	Book-reading place	13	FG (with a teddy bear)
	46	Koller	Canada	Inclusion	12	Play-based Interview (Props and pictures used throughout)
	47	Merewether	Australia	Outdoor space	NR	Child-guided tour + observation + child-led photography + drawing and conversation
	48	Sturges	Australia	Participation	NR	Child-guided tour + child photography + drawings with interview + survey
	49	Theobald	Australia	Play	NR	Video-ethnography
2014	50	Corson	U.S.	Secret spaces	17	Observation + interview (drawing + sculpting + acting)
2013	51	Dellve	Sweden	Sounds and noise	36	FG + Individual Interview
	52	Mcintosh	New Zealand	Illness	5	Storybooks making + interview
	53	Tay-Lim	Singapore	Peer rejection	8	Individual interview + drawing
2012	54	Dubiski	Germany	Religion	140	GI
	55	Hanline	U.S.	Social experience	10	GI + Observation
	56	Størksen	Norway	Divorce	37	Q sorting
2011	57	Lopez-Dicastillo	UK	Diet and activity	38	GI + observation + Diary (drawings, handwritings)
	58	Wong	HK China	Play	4	Photo-taking + drawing + interview

Note. NR: not reported; FG: focus group; FN: field notes; GT: grounded theory; GI: group interview.

study. An ethnographic methodology was applied, including interviews and observations however, the authors did not report modifying the approach for children with additional needs. One study included a child with developmental delay, however, researchers were unable to capture this child's response and thus this child was removed from the study (Yildiz et al., 2020).

Children with diverse language background were captured in four studies. Among included studies, Pascal and Bertram (2021) included children with English as a second language, yet methods have not been reported in detail if they were adapted to attend this group of children. In Oh and Lee's (2019) ethnography study with two Korean children in an American preschool context, they adopted non-structured conversations with children's native language, Korean. Granö and Turunen (2022) supported the children who did not speak Finnish (interview language) with simple silhouette pictures. Fane et al. (2016) included a child who is learning English as an additional language by using emoji, and encouraged a variety of non-verbal and verbal responses. Studies that reported participant characteristics (30%) have captured the voice of children with diverse ethnicities. However, 41 out of 58 studies (71%) did not report participants' ethnicity.

Meanwhile, no included studies have reported the inclusion of Indigenous children nor discussed this.

Data Collection Methods

All studies described using verbal interviews to capture children's voice, with the exception of Coad et al. (2020), who used a combination of play-based activities, field notes, and filming. Children's body language, vocalization, and visual attention were recorded using head-mounted camera worn by the children and supplemented by researcher field notes (Coad et al., 2020). Methods to capture data relating to children's perspectives and experiences are shown in Table 2. Of the 57 studies that included interviewing as a data collection method, eight studies used interview only (5, 6, 23, 24, 33, 35, 51, 54), 34 studies (1–4, 7, 10, 12, 14–22, 25–28, 30, 34, 36–39, 43, 45, 46, 49, 52, 53, 56) adopted one additional data collection method such as drawing, photography, video or puppetry, and 15 studies (8, 9, 13, 29, 31, 32, 40–42, 44, 47, 48, 50, 57, 58) incorporated two or more methods to elicit children's voice. Draw-and-tell was the most popular method, used in 25 studies, followed by photo-elicitation ($n = 10$). Video-cued ethnography ($n = 6$), puppetry ($n = 4$), pretend/role play ($n = 3$), and crafting (e.g., storybook-making) (n

= 2) were also commonly applied. Two studies adopted child-guided tour as part of their multi-method approaches (47, 48). One study included a process where children were asked to order a set of pictures in response to prompting questions (31). Q methodology, an approach combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques to study human "subjectivity", was adopted in Størksen et al. (2012), while concept mapping (13), emoji as a visual research method (26) to elicit young children's voice, and a child-friendly scale were captured in one study each.

Among the 57 studies that used interviews, 44 studies described the interview format. Individual interview (61%) was the most common interview format. Group interview was included in 15 studies (31%) where the presence of peers supported researchers to minimize the asymmetrical power imbalance (14, 18, 23, 26, 27, 34, 37, 40, 42, 44, 45, 49, 51, 55, 57). Two studies (40, 51) included both individual and group interviews. In terms of the interview question types, almost all studies (98%) used open-ended questioning to provoke children's thinking and help them elaborate opinions and experiences. This is aligned with the findings from Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al.'s (2019) review of 1,339 child interviewee-adult interviewer exchanges, where encouragement, open-ended questions and question requests produced the richest data.

The draw-and-tell technique was widely adopted, with 24 studies including drawing as part of the data collection process (1–4, 8–10, 12, 13, 17, 25, 31, 32, 38–41, 43, 47, 48, 50, 53, 57, 58). Draw-and-tell is a child-centered, visual research method that supports children to communicate their feelings and thoughts (Horstman et al., 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996), and was used during or before the interview. Cooke et al. (2020) interviewed the children while they were drawing, suggesting this visual and interactive format is similar to children's everyday learning experiences, thus helping children feel comfortable. Eleven out of the 24 studies that included drawing to elicit children's perspectives reported the materials used; crayons were used in five studies, felt-tipped pens and pencils in three studies each, and pastels were applied in one study. The remaining studies used permanent mediums but did not report the details.

Synthesized Findings From the Quality Appraisal

The results of the quality appraisal results are shown in Table 3 and summarized in relation to credibility, power relations and child agency, and ethics.

Credibility. Among the included studies, nine triangulated data by capturing perspectives of other key stakeholders. Triangulation occurred through interviews with teachers/educators (7, 8, 15, 16, 19, 28, 31), enlisting teachers to assist in the interpretation and confirmation of children's response (41), interviews with parents/caregivers (7, 31), or questionnaire for parents/caregivers (26, 44). Fifteen studies (8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 29, 37, 40, 42, 43, 47, 48, 50, 58) used multiple methods in their data-gathering process.

Another way to strengthen the reliability and validity of the interview process is to pilot test interview questions. This can allow researchers to identify ethical and practical issues (Kelly, 2007). Seven studies (5, 23, 24, 28, 35, 45, 56) consulted field experts and/or pilot tested interview questions with children prior to conducting the research. This process provides valuable information on the suitability of the questions for young children and can identify where modification or improvements are needed (Majid and Vanstone, 2018). For example, Jug and Vilar (2015) found children were unable to understand some questions during pilot testing, and subsequently revised their questions. Akman and Dila (2021) revised the sequence of questions after consultation with field experts and pilot interviews with five children. Sancar and Severcan (2010) piloted the Q sorting cards with five children and adjusted some of the cards to remove distraction and unclear content.

Power relations and child agency. Twenty-one studies (7, 14, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 32, 34, 37, 41, 43–50, 53, 57) explicitly discussed rapport building between children and adults as part of the study process, with researchers typically visiting the ECEC setting in the days or weeks prior to the data collection to get to know the children, their educators, routines and setting. Research questions were not raised during these visits. For example, Ólafsdóttir et al. (2017) spent a month visiting each preschool, getting to know the children and their culture, actively participating in children's play and aiming to build "a trusting relationship" (p. 829). A similar approach was reported by Merewether's (2015), where three full-day rapport-building visits supported children's familiarization with the data collection equipment (cameras and audio-recorders).

Researcher's reflexive consideration of their relationship with young children can play an important role in addressing the inherent power asymmetry. This, however, was not consistently recognized or explored in the studies captured in this review. Twenty-seven studies (1, 2, 4, 7, 12, 15, 19–26, 29, 31, 40, 41, 45, 46, 50, 52–56, 58) considered the relationship between researchers and children and sought to mediate the power imbalance through the purposeful selection of data-collection methods and rapport building. For example, in Cooke et al. (2020), children were interviewed in pairs or in groups to help reduce the potential for discomfort in the presence of an unfamiliar adult interviewer. Using drawing-prompted, semi-structured interviews, some children preferred talking with the researcher without drawing or "acting out" their experiences of relaxation in ECEC, and their preference was respected by the researchers (Cooke et al., 2020). Fane et al. (2016) physically positioned the researcher on the same plane as the child, used child-friendly methodological approaches (emoji), and explicitly explained to children that their expression of feelings will be used to teach adults. Fane et al. (2016) sought to address the power imbalance between themselves and the children, while acknowledging and positioning child participants as authoritative sources of knowledge.

Table 3. Quality Appraisal Results of Included Studies.

	First author (Year)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
1	Çetin & Taşdemir (2022)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Granö and Turunen (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	No	Unclear	Unclear
3	Parlakyildiz et al. (2022)	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
4	Theodosiadou and Kyridis (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear
5	Akman and Dila (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Bayrak (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Unclear	Unclear
7	Farrugia and Busuttil (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Pascal (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Spiteri (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Bay (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
11	Coad (2020)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	Cooke (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	Kucukturan and Kolemen (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
14	Payne et al. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Unclear
15	Pranoto and Hong (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear
16	Templeton (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes
17	Yildiz (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Unclear	Unclear
18	Keung and Fung (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	Kim (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear
20	Mertala and Mikko (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
21	Oh (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	Rashedi et al. (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes
23	Ree et al. (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
24	Şahin–Sak (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
25	Wiseman et al. (2019)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
26	Fane et al. (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
27	Ferreira et al. (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
28	Golden and Jacoby (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
29	McCormick (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear
30	Tas (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Unclear
31	Ünlü-Çetin (2018)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear
32	Deans et al. (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
33	Yıldız et al. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Unclear
34	Helgeland and Lund (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
35	Izumi-Taylor and Chia-Hui (2017)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
36	Izumi-Taylor et al. (2017)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
37	Ólafsdóttir (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes
38	Sezgin and Hatipoğlu (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
39	Güneş et al. (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Unclear	Unclear
40	Carter and Nutbrown (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
41	Nortjé and van der Merwe (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear
42	Almqvist and Almqvist (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unclear	No	Yes	Yes
43	Gunindi (2015)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear	Unclear
44	Henward (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
45	Jug (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unclear	Unclear
46	Koller and San Juan (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Unclear
47	Merewether (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
48	Sturges (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
49	Theobald et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
50	Corson et al. (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
51	Dellve et al. (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Unclear	No	Yes	Yes
52	McIntosh et al. (2013)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 3. (continued)

	First author (Year)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
53	Tay–Lim and Gan (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
54	Dubiski et al. (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Unclear
55	Hanline and Silvia (2012)	Yes	Unclear	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Unclear	Unclear
56	Størksen et al. (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
57	Lopez-Dicastillo and Gallery (2011)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
58	Wong et al. (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Unclear	Unclear

Three studies (21, 24, 35) reported that children were invited to choose where the interview would take place. Except for choosing the research location, no studies captured in this review described the inclusion of young children in planning and analysis phases of the research. Consideration of young children's agency was not evident in more than half of the study designs.

Ethical considerations and practices. Findings suggests that researchers are increasingly aware of ethical considerations when engaging young children in research. Thirty studies (1, 4–7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17–19, 21–23, 26–28, 32, 34, 40, 43, 47–49, 52, 54, 56, 57) clearly stated the source of ethics approval. Confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and consent from the gatekeepers (i.e., parents, caregivers, centers) were considered in 42 studies (1, 5, 7–9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18–20, 23–34, 37, 40–42, 44, 46, 47–53, 56, 57). For example, Spiteri's (2020) and Ólafsdóttir et al. (2017) invited children to choose the pseudonym for their preschool and for their names. This safeguarded anonymity and protected the integrity and privacy of participants, while also helping children to understand researchers' ethical duties regarding confidentiality (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2017).

Thirty-three studies (1, 7–9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20–28, 32, 34, 37, 40, 42, 44, 49, 50–53, 56, 57) explicitly stated that children's assent was sought. However, only five studies (8, 37, 40, 42, 48) stated clearly that seeking assent from children was not a "one-off" event, rather, assent was constantly negotiated with children, described as "process consent" (Health et al., 2007, p. 409). Four practical elements were derived as important in the assent seeking process. Firstly, in 12 studies (5, 9, 20, 24, 26, 32, 37, 40, 42, 48, 49,53), authors provided children with information relating to research aims and what to expect as a research participant using child-friendly language, prior to seeking children's assent. Children were also encouraged to ask questions to further clarify their understandings. Secondly, during the data-collection process, seven studies (9, 12, 19, 20, 22, 25, 37) noted that researchers explained to children, in age-appropriate language, that they have the right and freedom to stop the research activity and withdraw at any point, without explanation or consequences. Further, three studies (9, 11, 24) recognized that verbal and/or non-verbal cues can suggest children are not comfortable, and this needed to be considered as dissent. To ensure all children's

rights were acknowledged and respected, Mertala and Mikko (2019) welcomed all children to participate in the activity regardless of whether they were part of the study (data was not collected from children who were not participants).

Child assent was provided verbally in all but four studies (42, 49, 53, 57). Tay–Lim and Gan (2012) developed a child-friendly written assent form where children were invited to draw their unique "signature." Children were asked to comment on what they had expressed in the assent form to better understand their thoughts. In one example, the researchers noted a child's comment in the assent form, "This is happy face because I want to help you" (p. 49).

Discussion

With regards to the first research question, evidence from our review suggest that interview was the most common strategy to capture young children's voice; this is often coupled with other child-friendly methods as prompts (e.g., drawing, photographs, video, emoji). Various interview techniques were described in the included studies (i.e., individual, group, combined), with authors typically drawing on conversational techniques to conduct interviews with young children. These interviews were conducted while children were engaging in familiar play (e.g., drawing, puppetry, taking photos) and aimed to address the potential power imbalances between researchers and children, and encourage children to feel comfortable in expressing themselves (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). However, it is possible that the current reliance on interviewing for data collection may disenfranchise some children who are unable or unwilling to communicate verbally, however are able and willing to share their perspectives in different ways.

Among these data-collection techniques, draw-and-tell was most commonly used. One unique insight derived from the present review suggests that non-permanent methods of data generation with children are not often utilized. In studies that included drawing, children were provided with permanent mediums (e.g., crayons, pencils, felt tip pens). Notably, non-permanent markings (e.g., chalk drawings) have not been included in any studies, nor did the other forms of transient art (e.g., loose parts creation). Future studies may consider whether offering non-pressure mark-making mediums (i.e., chalk, sand, water etc.) further supports children's participation in research as

expressive mediums. Non-permanent mediums might create a safer environment for communication and encourage deeper dialogue from children as "mistakes" can be rectified, and children are able to make decisions about their mark-making.

Evidence obtained from this review also suggest that including multiple data collection methods may help capture young children's voice, generating richly textured and credible data. This review builds on the findings of previous research suggesting that a one size fits all approach is not appropriate when researching with young children (Clark, 2005). In terms of methods, it may be appropriate for researchers to think about children's social interactions from a pedagogical perspective and draw for inspiration upon the underpinning ideals for working with children that are well established in ECEC. Considering the ways that children communicate is a helpful heuristic; however, utilizing child-friendly activities for data collection should not be equated with the equalization of power relationships between children and adult researchers. Young children have diverse ways of meaning-making, they are rights-holders (United Nations, 1989), social-agents (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002), and knowledge constructors (Dockett & Perry, 1996). They are capable of expressing themselves when appropriate methods are used. It is imperative to understand how young children make meaning, participate in their communities, and communicate with others before beginning any research in which they might be involved. Further, enabling multiple modalities of expression offers young children the freedom to communicate in ways that suit their purpose. Such multiple data collection techniques also work as a triangulation, which increases the credibility of the research.

Credibility in research with young children, however, has not been systematically examined nor has it been discussed specifically in child-centered research. The studies included typically applied triangulation of methods (i.e., multiple data sources captured from different data collection methods) and captured different perspectives (i.e., teachers, caregivers) to increase the credibility of findings. Triangulation by examining teachers' or caregivers' interpretations of children's views, however, might be problematic when it comes to the authenticity of child voice. For example, Pearlman and Michaels (2019) found significant differences in how school staff and family members interpreted children's views captured through interviews. This suggests that triangulation via adult's interpretations and perspectives should be practiced with caution, while children's voice, captured from various data collection methods (e.g., Mosaic approach), should be prioritized when it comes to triangulation to ensure authenticity. In addition to the known dimensions of credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Liao & Hitchcock, 2018) such as triangulation, reflexivity, and multivocality, what is considered in terms of credibility and how to enhance credibility in research with young children requires further exploration.

Regarding the second research question, in terms of ethical practices, there appears to be a need to further consider children's agency in relation to adult decision making about research, and the inclusion of assent-seeking as an ongoing research process.

The social relations between those involved in the research, the ways in which methods are ontologically informed and practiced by researchers, and the extent to which children's capacity and social conditions are accounted for are important for children's participation (Abebe, 2019; Gallagher, 2019). However, less than half of the included studies discussed rapport-building prior to or during the process of the data collection with children. Building relationships can help mitigate age and cultural barriers that may exist (Stirrup, 2019); power can be more evenly distributed between researchers and children, where children can feel more comfortable and less intimidated. Researchers' consideration of their relationship with young children can also help to minimize the inherent power imbalance, yet only half of the included studies described this reflexive practice. This also involves consideration of the extent to which power relations are culturally shaped and informed, such as for Indigenous children, or children growing up in non-dominate cultural communities.

Understanding power relationships can promote young children's agency (Gallagher, 2019). Studies included in this review typically did not involve young children in the planning and interpretation stage of the study. Children could be further encouraged to meaningfully participate in research, for example, by selecting their preferred data-collection methods and assisting in data interpretation (Harcourt, 2011). The findings of this review highlight that how researchers understand and mediate power differentials are a fundamental aspect of research with children. The notion of child agency varies across cultures and is influenced by moral and political ideas in specific cultural context (Bordonaro, 2012; Sirkko et al., 2019). Therefore, as agency and participation are culturally specific (Gell, 1998), cultural norms concerning adult and child relationships should be considered regarding children's contributions to research.

Notably, the voice of children with additional needs (e.g., speech and/or communication barrier, English as a second/additional language) are not adequately represented or accommodated in child voice research conducted in ECEC settings. Future research with young children should consider the inclusion of all children's voice and explore the methods that better attend to their needs. This is contingent on understanding how cultural practices inform and shape relationships between adults and children, particularly determining who is allowed to speak, when and how– even when research is nominally focused on capturing children's voice. Moreover, it is noteworthy that no studies have reported or discussed the inclusion of Indigenous children. Various factors might contribute to the paucity of research capturing the voice of young Indigenous children, including lower levels of participation in ECEC compared with non-indigenous children (OECD, 2021).

Further, researchers may not be collecting or reporting data relating to cultural background. It is important to note that our search strategy did not include "Indigenous" or related terms, and relevant studies may therefore have been missed. Considering that 71% of the included articles did not report child ethnicity, this highlights an important focus for future research with young children in ECEC settings.

Finally, this review identifies a discrepancy between optimal practice described in the literature and the actual assent-seeking processes for researching with children. Over half of the studies sought assent from young children, however only five described assent-seeking as a process. Seeking assent from children should not be a "one-of" event (Morrow, 2008; Spriggs, 2010), rather, it should be practiced as a "process consent" (Health et al., 2007, p. 409). As in-the-moment ethical challenges emerge, children's participation should be negotiated and re-negotiated to be considered ethical (Moore et al., 2018).

Limitations

The current review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Grey literature was not captured, nor studies published in languages other than English, or studies published before 2011; relevant studies may therefore have been missed. Our findings are based on the data reported within the included studies. Researchers, due to various reasons (e.g., limited space of a manuscript), may not always report details of their data-collection methods or ethical practices. It is possible that researchers were using methods and practices to elicit young children's voice that were not captured in this review; readers should be mindful of this limitation when considering the findings. It is also important to acknowledge the nature of ethnographic studies, where rapport-building and assent-seeking are essential to the research. Given processes, such as child assent, within this form of research are well-established, authors may not explicitly describe these processes in their published research. Finally, this review focuses on ECEC settings where children's perspectives, experiences and beliefs have been captured. It is likely studies in other contexts, such as home, health or community settings, would offer additional insights on research with children.

Conclusion

Findings of the present review indicate gaps in the conduct of research with young children, especially concerning the participation of children with additional needs, children with speech or language needs, and Indigenous children in research. In addition, advancing non-permanent methods of meaning making with children appears ripe for methodological innovation, noting that permanent methods may have been previously privileged for the purpose of capturing children's voices so that research can be reported rather than actively listening to children's voices via whichever means are most suitable for the child. In this manner, child-centered methods do not necessarily equate with a mechanism for addressing power imbalances. Findings also suggest that discrepancies may be evident between the rights-based literature and the ways in which research with young children is being reported, suggesting a need to more deeply understand children's agency in the context of cultural relationships with adults and assent-seeking as an ongoing process.

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