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Spaces for play: listening to children's voices

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores young children's voices about their play spaces in one Scottish primary school. 45 children (ages 5–7 years) participated, choosing from a range of creative methods (e.g. InPhoTours, drawing, mapping) to share their voices. Using a 'Playful Research Ethics Framework', a developmentally appropriate framework which involved the use of visual aids, puppets, songs, Makaton symbols and discussions as well as attention to any cues of disengagement, this research aimed at achieving children's ongoing informed assent. Four themes were identified: (a) the 'whole child' in the space, (b) space and relationships, (c) function of space, and (d) impact (or lack) of children's voices about space. Children expressed differences in ownership, creativity and imagination in indoor and outdoor spaces. Further, despite perceiving there to be a lack of agency, children were willing to share their voices. There are implications for both practice and research in terms of adults willing to effectively listen to children's voices *and* acting on them. This study makes original and significant contributions which have the potential to impact research and practice with young children internationally.

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Space; play; children's voices; visual methods; creative methods; Playful Research Ethics Framework (PREF)

Introduction

The aim of this study was to listen to children's voices about their spaces for play in a Scottish primary school. This was a practice-initiated study as the first author was invited by the head teacher to work with children aged 5–7. The main research question was: *What is it like to be in this space?*

For this study, we undertook a narrative review to understand what is known (and not known) in the research literature related to children's play spaces, how voice has been conceptualised and operationalised, and most importantly, what methods have been used to listen to children's voices. We will now discuss these three strands of research literature, alongside critiquing them.

Children's play spaces

Although there is research on children's participation in the design of learning environments, particularly outdoor ones (Clark and Moss 2005), most of it is embedded in preschool where listening to children's voices in relation to the creation of their play spaces has evolved over the last twenty years (e.g. Merewether 2015). There is a paucity of literature focusing on primary school children's voices in the creation and meaning making of their everyday spaces, with some exceptions (e.g. Burke 2005).

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The spaces that appeal to children are those that resonate with them in a variety of ways, including the enjoyment, or not, of an adult free space, preferences for being in an outdoor play space (Einarsdottir 2005), and opportunities for engaging in risky play when outdoors (e.g. Hansen Sandseter 2007). However, perceptual differences exist between children's and adults' thinking about spaces (Moore 2015), suggesting the importance of listening to children's voices in their choices of spaces (Vuorisalo, Rutanen, and Raittila 2015). Further, it is crucial that teachers understand the integral concept of space, which includes listening to children's voices as otherwise the affordances offered in those environments and spaces will be perceived differently (Gibson 1979) and opportunities for deep learning experiences will be lost (Gandini 2011).

This led to the consideration of where children are in their play spaces in the participating primary school, who they are, who they like to share the spaces with, and in which ways. Children make meaning in the complex space between the physical space and all non-human and human elements contained within that space at any time. Therefore, we undertook a study to listen to children's voices about their play space in the context of their primary school.

We were mindful that if we use methods meaningful to children to listen to their many languages (Cagliari et al. 2016), children can, and do, share what matters most to them (Clark and Moss 2005; Perry, Adi-Japha, and Spektor-Levy 2023).

Children's voice

Despite the emphasis on young children's voice, underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Article 12 (Lundy 2007; United Nations 1989), voice and listening to that voice is a contested area. Some argue that children do not have a voice, and others provide guiding principles ensuring that we listen to their voice. Regardless, researchers must demonstrate their ongoing commitment to involving children in research as their legal right rather than 'the gift of adults' (Lundy 2007, 931)

To explore this, we carried out a systematic literature review of international research, that followed the seven steps of the EPPI-Centre (2007) approach to systematic literature reviews with explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria, keywords and databases, and focussed on listening to young children's voice (Urbina-Garcia et al. 2022). We found that in most of the 74 studies (published between 2015 and 2020) that met the inclusion criteria, there was limited evidence of actually listening to children's voice. Further, although the advantages of listening to the child's voice were articulated in most studies, we found that most data collection methods were adult-led (e.g. interviews, focus groups) or researchers confirmed children's views through adults' data (e.g. parents, teachers). This could be due to adults not trusting young children to be able to lead or provide their views about aspects that they are experts on, i.e. matters that would affect them more than anyone else. Or it might be due to the inherent power imbalance between the adults and children (Akyol 2020), with some adults being unwilling to change that imbalance (Viskovic and Višnjić-Jevtić 2020). Alternatively, it could be that researchers lack confidence in their own skills to create and use innovative and creative methods of data collection (Jindal-Snape et al. 2013).

We also found that child-led methods, such as children taking photos, draw and tell. and drawings allowed for more control being passed over to children (Alvarez 2018; Martin and Buckley 2020; Streelasky 2020). One could argue that even these methods were adult-initiated, with children having no agency in choosing data collection methods of most interest to them.

Of course, the concept of 'agency' is contested in itself (Mentha, Church, and Page 2015) and in this study's context, we acknowledge that children's agency can be limited when researchers go into a setting as it is difficult for them to look for opportunities to listen to children's voices in child-initiated ways. Nevertheless, we believe that researchers can transfer some control to children by providing multiple methods of data collection which children can choose from to have their voices heard.

Therefore, in this study, it became imperative that there was a range of data collection methods, based on play pedagogy, from which children could freely choose. This study is unique in the range of adult-initiated but child-led creative methods that were included. Creativity is widely accepted to be a key feature of children's play and imagination (Tsai 2012), and is a core area of cognition, regardless of the developmental stage of the child (Burke and Williams 2008; 2009). The research team, comprising previous early years educators in nurseries and schools, were cognisant of play pedagogy and using playful ways to collect data as well as any hidden messages they might get from us (or their teachers) (Pajares 1992) about the importance of their voice. Researchers spread out in the school setting, with children going to spaces and activities they wanted to participate in.

Conceptualisation and theorisation of voice

However, what is voice? Our systematic literature review found that not all authors had conceptualised and/or theorised voice in their articles (Urbina-Garcia et al. 2022). This is problematic as it has been argued that our conceptualisation of voice is shaped by our ideology, cultural belief and world view (Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2013) and therefore, voice is a social and multidimensional construct evolving over time (Komulainen, Korhonen, and Räty 2013).

According to Urbina-Garcia et al. (2022), 43 (58%) articles in their systematic review had provided a theoretical framework, including theories and models; there was an increase in this trend with 23 out of 35 (66%) studies published in 2019 and 2020 doing so. It was surprising to see little overlap; 33 different theoretical frameworks were used in the 43 articles. Some examples include, Socio-cultural Theory and Social Constructivism, Cultural Models Theory, Funds of Knowledge Theory, Hart's Ladder of Participation Theory and Self-determination Theory. These did not necessarily include the theorisation of voice, rather they indicated how the data were analysed.

In this study, we conceptualise voice as a social and multidimensional construct (Flynn, Shevlin, and Lodge 2013), and theorise it based on the Lundy (2007) model of voice. The latter includes four dimensions that are important to listen to children's voice; (i) they must be given the opportunity (space) to provide their voice, (ii) we must create ways to facilitate their participation and contribution (voice), (iii) their contribution must be listened to (audience) and finally, (iv) acted upon (influence).

Wall and colleagues' eight principles also influenced this study (namely, definition, power, inclusivity, listening, time and space, approaches, processes, and purposes, Blaisdell et al. 2019). As adult researchers, our role was to provide children space where their voices were heard and had the *potential* to be acted upon (Kupfer 2011). We strongly believe in Malaguzzi's (Cagliari et al. 2016) hundred languages of children approach, identifying the great diversity of ways children prefer to make their voice heard.

Therefore, this study aimed to fill a number of gaps found in previous literature: moving beyond tokenism by providing multiple opportunities and creative methods; children having the choice about which methods they wanted to use, and when, to mitigate for adult-initiated methods; acknowledging children as experts; and articulating our conceptualisation and theorisation of the key terms.

Methodology

Participatory research design – why and how

A participatory research design was adopted with the school identifying this as an area of research, followed by meeting with the teachers to discuss potential data collection methods to ensure they were congruent with their current pedagogical practices. Furthermore, daily 'huddles' occurred, in which researchers and teachers gathered together to discuss what was emerging and to begin conversations about enacting children's views about their play spaces and incorporating new methods of listening to children. Although originally intended, teachers were unable to be involved in data collection (and analysis), limiting the participatory nature of the study. Use of a participatory research

design was essential so that the school had ownership of the study and could implement the children's suggestions, thereby ensuring that children not only had space, voice and audience but could also influence the design and use of play spaces (Lundy 2007).

In line with our conceptualisation that children's voices are multi-dimensional and communicated in many different languages (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015) we used multiple data collection methods. Our aim was to value and amplify children's voices within their real-world spaces, tapping into their naturally occurring multimodal communication (Gray and Winter 2011). Children could choose how and when they wanted their voices heard and how they wanted to engage with the project. This mitigated some of the challenges listed by Urbina-Garcia et al. (2022) by removing some of the adult-led restrictions, placing more control with the children (Adderley et al. 2015). However, we were mindful that the data collection methods had been initiated by the adults, i.e. teachers and researchers, so there were some restrictions inevitably imposed on them.

In this study, we were able to incorporate the first three dimensions of Lundy's (2007) model of voice with the research team creating spaces for play in their natural settings and facilitating their participation by using multiple creative methods over a period of one week which children could choose from (in the same day and across the week). The research team were the audience for that week, with the school staff being the main audience in the long term, with responsibility to act upon their voices to make changes to spaces for play.

Structure of the research week

The research week involved multiple researchers at various times in the week (seven researchers – five academics and two research assistants). This ensured flexibility in child-led exploration, allowing researchers to be available to children, immediately and in real time, for any data collection methods they chose. This contrasts with commonly used methods involving one researcher visiting across many months (e.g. Rouvali and Riga 2019). The research team was called, 'The Playful Researchers' to highlight the importance and value we placed on playful pedagogies. Prior to the research week, Lynsey provided professional learning (half day) with the school team (i.e. two primary one teachers, two primary two teachers, an Early Years Officer and the Depute Headteacher) to explore the theme of 'Children's Voices' and allowed reciprocal dialogue about the project week's structure and purpose.

During the daily 'huddles' between the researchers and the school staff, a 'Reflective' wall display was built to capture this dialogue (Figure 1).

Sample and recruitment

Children from four classes were invited to be involved through the primary school; two Primary one classes (children aged approx. 5 years) and two Primary two classes (children aged approx. 6 years). All classes were housed within one area of the school, sharing indoor and outdoor play spaces. 45 out of 88 children (51%; ages 5–7) participated in the study.

Methods of data collection

Children as guides: observations

To familiarise children with the researchers moving around their spaces, and ourselves with children's spaces, three children 'guides' from each class were invited to allow the researchers to follow and engage in their play throughout one day, i.e. undertaking participant observation (Jindal-Snape and Topping 2010). We followed 12 children around for the first two days of the study (see Table 2). This allowed us to receive a holistic view of the children as they interacted in that space (see 'Learning Stories', Carr, Jones, and Lee 2005).

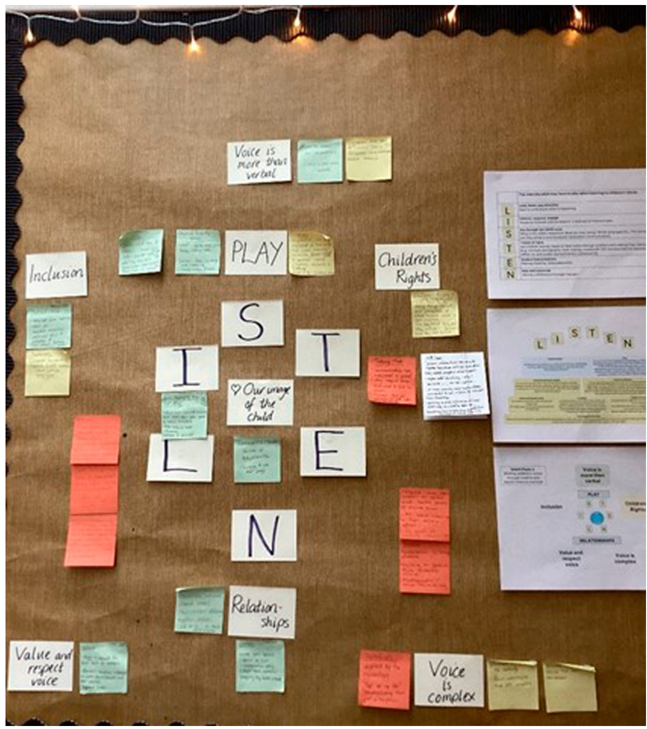


Figure 1. Reflective wall display.

Table 2. Methods of data collection.

Data collection method	Observations	Conversations using puppets	InPhoTour	Drawings	Floorbook	Mapping
Number of participants	12	6 interviews (56.4 min)	9 pairs (18 children in total)	14	24	10

Conversations using puppets

Children were invited, especially those who had not participated in any other approach, and six children chose to participate in one-to-one conversations with a researcher using puppets (see Epstein et al. 2008). The conversations were based on Clark's 'child conferencing' interview schedule (2017, 171) and covered topics such as children's favourite and least favourite spaces to play in school. These conversations were recorded using the 'Voice Recordings' function on an iPad.

InPhoTours

InPhoTours is a data collection method created for this study which combined key features from more established methods: taking photographs (e.g. Einarsdottir 2005), video tours (Dockett and Perry 2003), and using photos/videos as discussion prompts (e.g. Yan, Yuejuan, and Hongfen 2005). Nine pairs of children choose to lead a Playful Researcher around their play space (either indoors or outdoors), photographing anything significant on the iPad. Children were requested to avoid photographing children's faces. After the tour, the children looked through the photographs explaining why they had taken each photograph. Explanations were recorded using a voice note and inserted alongside the photograph.

Drawing

A writing provocation was created with children invited to draw and tell Spikey (the puppet) about the following, if they wished:

- What do you like doing in your play space?
- What don't you like doing in your play space?

Below the drawings was space for the child to describe their drawing. The Playful Researcher leading this activity scribed the children's words if requested (Robb et al. 2023). In total, over the week, 14 children chose to engage with this activity.

Floorbook

The floorbook is a common pedagogical approach within early years and has its roots in the Reggio Emilia culture of making children's voices visible (Dahlberg 2012; Rinaldi 2001). Floorbooks can include a variety of children's drawings, scribed comments and photographs to document children's learning (for an example of floorbooks being used in research, see Blaisdell et al. 2019). As the children in this setting had prior experience of floorbooks, the researchers intentionally incorporated this as an open-ended research activity, with children able to contribute (and return) to it throughout the week. Twenty-four children contributed to the floorbook.

Mapping

Photographs taken during the InPhoTours, were printed for the mapping activity. This provided children opportunities to interact with peers' photographs and drawings to co-construct knowledge and engage in meaning-making (Clark 2011). Two large rolls of paper were laid out along tables, representing children's indoor and outdoor space respectively. Five children engaged with the mapping at any one time, and 10 in total participated, supported by three Playful Researchers. Children chose how to represent their space, where to place the photographs, where to intersperse drawings and where they would like an adult to scribe their words (if at all).

Data analysis: reflexive thematic analysis

A total of 12 observations, 56.4 min of conversations, 19 InPhoTours, 14 drawings, 24 floorbook entries and entries from 10 children on the 'giant map' were transported into and coded through NVivo 12. As multiple methods of textual and visual data collection were used, it led to different types of data being collected, text-based and visual data.

Text-based data

Data from the conversations using puppets were transcribed by a professional transcription service prior to coding. Each researcher's observation notes were amalgamated into a 'Voice Vignettes' Powerpoint which highlighted episodes of children's voices.

Creative methods (text-based and visual data)

The InPhoTours, drawings, floorbook and the mapping data were examined alongside any accompanying text or speech (if provided). Pictures, text and pictures with accompanying text, were coded individually.

We used QSR International's NVivo 12 programme as it can assist in storing different types of data in one place as well as the organisation, analysis and visualisation of multiple types of data (Dhakal 2022). It also provided a systematic approach that enhanced the robustness and transparency of data analysis.

In this study, an abductive approach was used for data analysis: it was primarily inductive as themes emerged from the data but also deductive as there was an underpinning theory and

principles that influenced data collection to some extent, and potentially, its analysis (Thompson 2022). The first author analysed data from all of the above methods thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis to highlight the lived experiences and voices of children. This involved an inductive analytical approach including the first author familiarising herself with all the data by looking at the images and reading the transcripts. She then identified the key emerging themes and analysed them cross-sectionally, alongside analysing using our theoretical lens and principles. Further, the researcher was mindful of her own positionality and an understanding of where her perspective as an early year's professional and/or adult might be influencing the analysis as well as interpretation.

Designing and implementing a Playful Research Ethics Framework (PREF)

The study was approved by the University of Dundee's Research Ethics Committee (ref number SREC22-007). Following Local Authority approval, parents and carers were asked to provide consent for their child to be invited to participate in the study. Parents were contacted via the school's normal communication channel (school App) and completed either an online or paper consent form. 46 parents and carers agreed to their child's participation. Tensions are inherent in the ethics consent process where the voice of adults and systemic institutional policies are privileged over the voices of children. To mitigate against this, we developed and implemented a Playful Research Ethics Framework (PREF) with children who had parental consent; also highlighting the 'PREF*erence*' aspect of the study (Burke, Jindal-Snape, and Ding 2023). This ensured children themselves were able to articulate their willingness to participate in the study and activities. (Only one child chose not to participate, reducing the sample size to 45.)

PREF is based on the principles of voluntary participation, informed and ongoing assent and the welfare of the participants (see Figure 2). In presenting the findings, we were also mindful of confidentiality and anonymity of participants. We will now highlight how we implemented this framework. The originality comes from the play-based implementation of the four-stage ethics framework.

As previously mentioned, and in line with the first stage of the PREF (Burke, Jindal-Snape, and Ding 2023; see Figure 2), prior to the study week the researchers met with school staff to ensure there could be as smooth a transition as possible into the research week; the potential for familiarity of routines, practices and spaces was discussed and acted upon.

In preparation for the second stage of the PREF (the initial ethics session with children, see Figure 2), to create a safe space for participants' choice about engagement and given the relatively large number of people in the research team, building relationships with children was prioritised (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015). Each researcher wore a pastel coloured 'Playful Researcher' T-shirt with their name on it. These were read out to the children and made the researchers recognisable so that children could give ongoing informed assent.

With experience of working as nursery and early years educators, the experienced team then engaged in 'developmentally appropriate' practice for the delivery of the initial ethics session with children (see Table 1). The children were introduced to the researchers and to the two main puppets that would be present that week (Spikey and Swoops). Each puppet was introduced via storytelling and song. The children were able to join in with the songs and copy the actions along with the puppets. The puppets were then used to introduce the children to the aims of the research study. The aims were reinforced through visual aids, such as Makaton symbols and actions with which the children were already familiar. The children were told that the researchers and puppets were there:

- To **look** at their play
- To **listen** to their play
- To **think** about their play
- To **talk** about their play

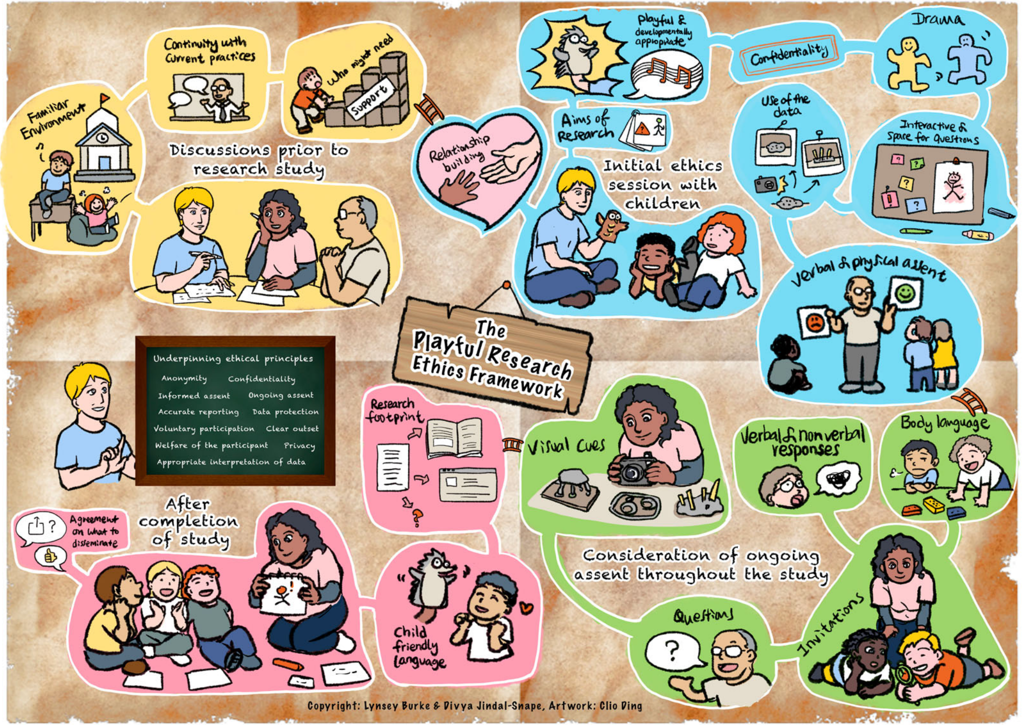


Figure 2. The Playful Research Ethics Framework.

But importantly, and reiterated throughout, only if the children wanted the researchers to do so. Ongoing assent was discussed, with children asked to think and talk about what it might look like if they decided not to participate (e.g. by showing how their faces might look, what verbal cues they might give the researchers). The researchers reinforced that children could decide to play and talk to the researchers at one moment, and then change their mind the next. Researchers showed their notebooks and indicated they would write things down, but only if the children wanted this. The different play-based activities were introduced to the children as voluntary.

After the explanation of the study, in small groups children were invited to 'post' their name into one of two hoops to indicate assent; one hoop marked with Spikey and Swoops (the puppets) and Makaton symbols, the other hoop empty. All children posted their name in the hoop with the puppets. However, ongoing assent was monitored and observed throughout the week (as per the third stage of the PREF, see Figure 2) and as mentioned earlier, one child withdrew.

At the end of the research week, the fourth stage of the PREF (see Figure 2) was enacted through the creation of a child-height and child-designed wall-display. Spikey and Swoops (the puppets) and some children who volunteered, showcased their display to children and teachers from all four

Table 1. Structure of the research week.

Monday and Tuesday	Wednesday and Thursday	Friday
Playful ethics sessions with children, using visual aids, puppets, songs and 'shoulder partner' discussions, Makaton (a language programme for communication)	Data collection methods (each led by a different Playful Researcher): - Conversations using puppets - InPhoTours - Drawings - Floorbooks	Data collection and dissemination methods: - Mapping activity Feedback to children and creation of children's wall display
Participant observations Building relationships with children		Full debrief session with staff

classes. These findings were then used as a catalyst for a further research project (Burke, Jindal-Snape and Douglas, Forthcoming).

Results and discussion

Four overarching themes were identified from analysing the entire dataset: (a) the 'whole child' in the space, (b) space and relationships, (c) function of space, and (d) impact (or lack) of children's voices about space. Children's voices have been portrayed through their artefacts and words.

The 'whole child' in the space

This theme relates to a holistic view of the child; the experiences, views and connections they bring with them into their play space and which may influence the emotions they experience within it.

Many children conveyed a general 'feeling' of happiness in their school play spaces. Often, their feelings about their space did not appear to be related to one specific place, situation or resource (see Figure 3).

> I love everything. (Child 3, Conversations using puppets)

> I like to play with most things. (Child 44, Conversations using puppets)

This sense of happiness might be due to a combination of factors, such as autonomy, agency and active engagement in the space (Storli and Hansen Sandseter 2019). In contrast, some children identified external causes which influenced how they felt within their collective play space, such as the weather (Figures 4 and 5):

> Well there's one place that I don't like to play outside. Like, when it's puddly. I get out when it's puddly, but I hate it when I get out when it's puddly .... (Child 3, Conversations using puppets)

They also highlighted how they felt in their spaces depending on their attitudes towards particular curricular areas (Figure 6).

Children also naturally 'brought with them' connections with their lives outside of the school to their current play space, highlighting that they viewed their spaces holistically (Figure 7).

Similarly, in the observation and InPhoTour, children brought their 'real-life' experiences into their play space, again highlighting that they do not differentiate between the world of 'make-believe'

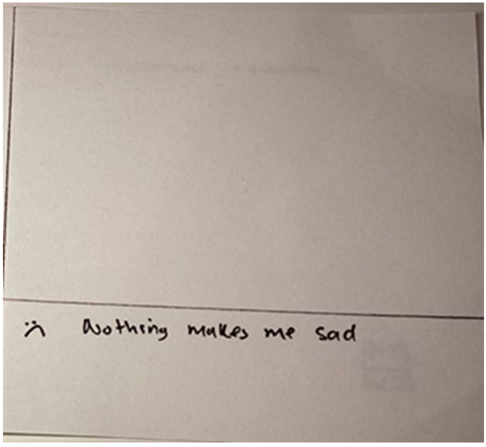


Figure 3. Nothing makes me sad (Child 40, Drawing).

Figure 4. I am happy when it is sunny, because it is very bright (Child 16, Drawing).

Figure 5. I am happy when I see a rainbow outside (Child 29, Drawing).

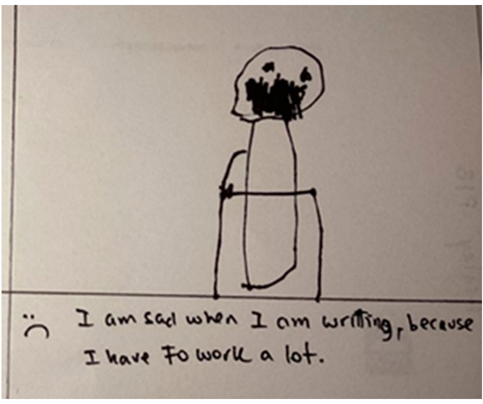


Figure 6. I am sad when I am writing, because I have to work a lot (Child 11, Drawing).

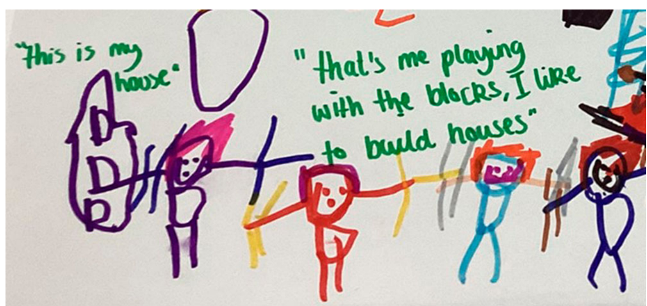


Figure 7. This is my house (Anonymous child, floorbook entry).

and 'reality', with play *being* their real-life (Figures 8 and 9). This is not surprising as this is considered to be a core feature of child-led play (e.g. Fisher 2013).

Children's explicit references to their lives outside of school can also be viewed as a home-school transition support strategy, to help them feel 'secure' when they are away from their most familiar grown-ups and homes (Jindal-Snape 2016).

Space and relationships

This theme refers to the dynamic interplay between the space and the actors within it. Subthemes arising highlight relationships as a crucial influencing factor and the impact of (negatively perceived) peers' actions.

When discussing their favourite spaces to play, often, it was the friendships which influenced children's feelings about being in that space, rather than the play space itself (Figure 10).

> I like my friends and the area that [name removed] was in. (Child 3, Conversations using puppets)

Similarly, in general, if a child did not have a good relationship with others or had had an argument, that negatively affected their view of their play spaces (Figure 11).

Tales of Callendar House…

One child was in the block area. He said, "We're trying to make a castle – like this" (he pointed to the photograph on the wall). "The pictures tell me what to build and I can see how popular they are".

"If I want to make a castle, I need a floor and a door and a wall. It stops people trying to break in. Like a dragon. But we might need to build a dragon."

He then crossed the environment to collect paper and then sat at the writing table and said, "I'm drawing what the castle would look like for real" (as opposed to in a photo). "When I was at Callendar house, there were windows at it. It showed me the history of it and the Battle of Falkirk. It showed me the journey I could take across the wall and I tried to follow it. There was a wee bit in-front and I walked across it."

Once he had drawn his castle, he returned to the block area to build it from his diagram. "I know – it's a wee curve, so I'm going to start with this".

He saw one of his friends passing and asked, "Do you want to help me? I'm drawing Callendar park." The other boy asked him if he had seen the fireworks there. "Yes! I went to Falkirk stadium with my cousins and family and gran and grandad".

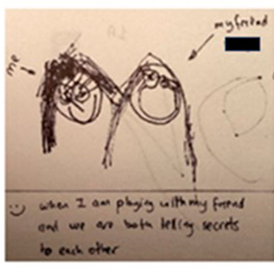
Figure 8. We're trying to make a castle (Child 31, Observation).

I like making fish tanks with the animals and like doing stuff in real life to make the fish happy, like put clean water and food in it... Like I feed my own fish in real life in real... Cos I really like feeding my fish at home, it's very fun.

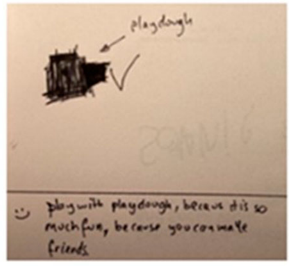
Figure 9. I like making fish tanks with the animals (Child 30, InPhoTour).

(Anonymous floorbook entry)

(Mapping activity)



(Child 13, Drawing)



(Child 19, drawing)

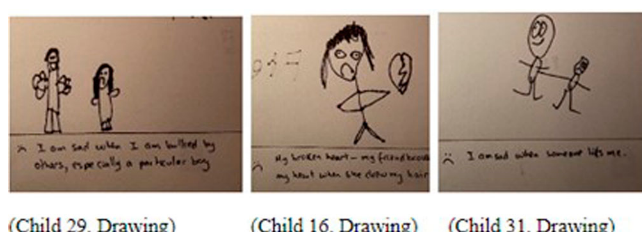
Figure 10. Space and relationships.

Child 3 related their feelings, whether positive or negative, to their friendships (see Figure 11). This example, plus others from the data, again appears to suggest that children's feelings and connections towards their play spaces are often inextricably linked to social factors and based on the strength of children's relationships with others (Adderley et al. 2015). Specific actions of peers (which children perceived negatively) were also frequently identified as influencing feelings about and towards play spaces and resources within it. When the children told the researchers that the sandpit was closed, their peers' actions were seen to be responsible.

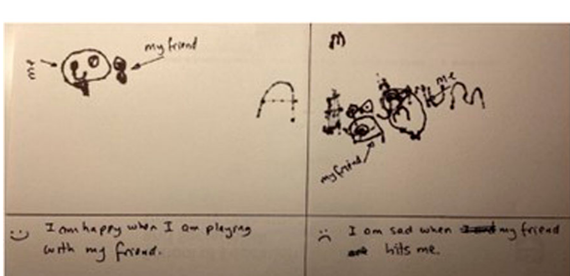
> It's because people are throwing too much sand out of the sandpit … Loads of people are putting loads of water in the sand as well. (Child 31, Conversations using puppets)

During an InPhoTour, one child explained that they did not play at the dolls' house as other children kept snatching from them (Figure 12).

Given that children's actions appear to have an influence not only on where children engage in play, but also on their feelings towards their play spaces, this could suggest that the role of the teacher is crucial in supporting children's socialisation within their play spaces (Viskovic and



(Child 29, Drawing) (Child 16, Drawing) (Child 31, Drawing)



(Child 3, Drawing)

Figure 11. Space and relationships.

Višnjić-Jevtić 2020). However, there could be a tension here as McInnes (2019) found that when adults became involved in 'play', children ceased to view that activity as play.

Function of space

This theme includes references to how spaces and resources were being used.

A prominent theme running throughout the data on children's indoor and outdoor spaces, was creativity (Sawyer et al. 2003). When discussing outdoors, it was the space, rather than specific resources within that space (which were sparse), which was used creatively by the children (Figure 13); the 'empty', open space appeared to be a catalyst for children's physical and imaginative play (Merewether 2015) through the affordances they perceived (Gibson 1979).

> There is a little plant pot but there's no water coming out, no dirt, and you can hide under it and nobody can see you. (Conversations using puppets, Child 41)

These examples and data from researcher observation notes show that the children's thoughts and ideas often brought the outdoor space alive through spontaneous play . On one occasion, a researcher observed a group of children engage in an 'Alien Adventure' outoors, using some disused materials and natural resources to spark in-depth, imaginary play. This echoes research

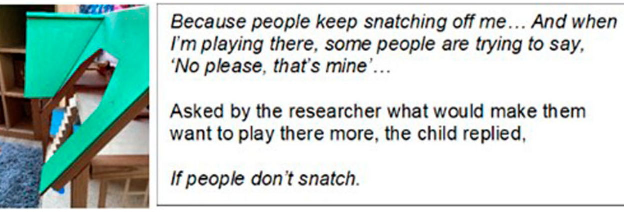


Figure 12. People keep snatching off me (Child 22, InPhoTour, Indoors).

(Anonymous entries, Floorbook)

(Child 40 and 25, InPhoTours) (Anonymous entry, Mapping)

Figure 13. Flexible function of outdoor space.

…so we can play with the blanket and we can make a den with the blankets and the cushions.

We make little beds in the den and then have a little nap in it.

(Child 13, InPhoTour 3, Slide 4)

You do drawings there.

(Anonymous entry, Mapping)

"I like playing here with my friend and we make aquarium and we also have another friend too. We put wee toy creatures in it.
When asked why an aquarium by researcher:
"Because it's in the water and there's water at the water tray".

(InPhoTour 4, Slide 5)

Figure 14. Functional fixedness of indoor spaces.

suggesting that children do not need spaces filled with resources to engage in deep play – the best resource for play is often their own imaginations and 'possibility thinking' (Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006).

By contrast, indoors, the children did not tend to use the space creatively, but instead, used the resources creatively within their specific areas. Children appeared to have set views and preconceived notions about how each play space and resource was to be used, perhaps demonstrating 'functional fixedness' (Duncker 1945; German and Defeyter 2000). Whilst still playing creatively, children frequently appeared to limit their creative play to the type of play they thought was associated with that play area (Figure 14).

> Like wee cooking stuff [in the kitchen]. (Conversations using puppets, Child 44)

> I builded things 'cause that's what you do at the bricks! (InPhoTour, Child 30)

However, this created a barrier to playing in spaces where they did not want to use the resources in a pre-specified and restrictive way (Figure 15).

At the 'loose parts' area, an open-ended provocation (see Figure 16) had been set out, but the children were unsure how to use this.

> I don't really play there (see Figure 16) because I don't know what to make. I'd like to change that. That could be where you can make opportunity things. (Anonymous entry, Mapping)

Therefore, in contrast to indoors, outdoors children were engaged in each of the four main types of play, i.e. imaginative play, constructive, physical and language play, with some children showing an interest in engaging in 'games with rules' (Slater and Bremner 2017). Children were using the environment imaginatively and engaging in 'possibility thinking', despite (or due to) the lack of adult engagement (Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006).

Impact (or lack) of children's voices about space

This theme includes references to changes that have been made in the space in the past, and suggestions about how the space could be better.

In general, the majority of children did not seem to feel ownership over 'their' play spaces. There was limited evidence of children's voices having influenced the creation of their current play space, and children's perception was that their voices are not being heard and listened to. Many of these comments resulted (or were highlighted) through one particular, significant event which happened

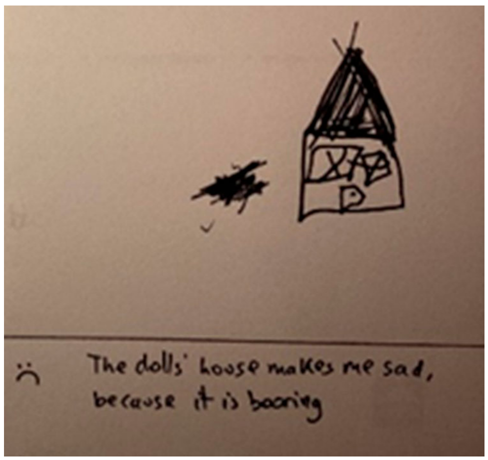


Figure 15. The dolls house makes me sad because it is boring (Child 19, Drawing).

I don't know what to do with it.

(Child 30, InPhoTour)

Figure 16. I don't know what to do with it (Child 30, InPhoTour).

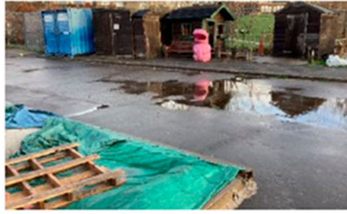


Figure 17. Researcher photos, prior to start of project week.

I like playing in here because I can play amazing lot.

Figure 18. I like playing in here because I can play amazing lot (Child 11 and 21, InPhoTours).

The blue hut is gone.

It's gone.

Figure 19. The blue hut is gone (Child 30, InPhoTour).

on the Wednesday of the research week. In the children's outdoor play spaces, there were a number of older huts (see Figure 17).

Children used the 'blue', 'green' and 'brown' huts for socialising and imaginative games. The children's attachment to these huts was evidenced on many occasions through different multi-media (see Figure 18).

> I used to play mums and dads in the hut. (Mapping scribed comment)

However, during an InPhoTour, when the children arrived in the playground after breaktime, they saw men in the playground, dismantling **their** huts. The children had not known this was going to happen, and therefore it appeared quite shocking for them to witness.

Both children carrying out the InPhoTour at the time, ran to take the picture shown in Figure 19.

Child 30 then said she didn't want to talk about it anymore, as it had been taken away.

The same pair of children then went to the brown hut to photograph it on part of their InPhoTour. They took the photograph (Figure 20 left), but at that point the men appeared and began to demolish that hut also (Figure 20 right).

The child then chose not to have their voice recorded and said they did not want to talk about it as it was '*too sad to talk about*'.

Both remaining pairs of children who ventured outside next, then also chose to document this in their InPhoTours (Figure 21).

> The hut is gone. It's sad. (Anonymous entry, Mapping)

Similar emotions about this unexpected change in their play space were identified across all data, and highlight the impact of perceived lack of agency. The children did not as frequently take photographs or talk about the areas of their play space which were unchanged, they typically commented on the areas which had changed, but without consultation (Mentha, Church, and Page 2015).

When reflecting on how children's voices were heard and acted upon in the **indoor** spaces, findings highlighted uncertainty about why decisions were made. However, that seemed to come as less of a surprise when changes were made in indoor spaces, suggesting that the children did not expect to have any agency or to have their voices heard about those play spaces and that the indoor spaces were seen to be more adult-owned (Figure 22).

> But then it turned into water and had lots of animals and then a couple of days ago it had big animals. (Child 30, InPhoTour)

Despite this, children were very keen to have their voices heard about future use of their play spaces. They shared numerous suggestions about what they feel is missing currently from their play space, including a climbing frame and tree, a treehouse and gym aligning with findings from Merewether (2015) and Hansen Sandseter (2007).

> … a climbing frame and a tree to climb. With some little stepper climbing bits and a big, massive branch that holds way much people … . (Conversations using puppets, Child 3)

Figure 20. Brown hut demolished (Child 9, InPhoTour).

I don't like this because it is broken by some builders. I liked-ed it. I went into it, playing in it.
The researcher asked what sort of things they usually played in it, and the pair replied,

Tig. We were hiding in it, and now it's knocked down.

(Child 27 and Child 20, InPhoTours)

Figure 21. I don't like it (Child 27, Child 20, InPhoTours).

I like it because I can play in it with my friends and but I just play with it in the water. Usually if it's sand or something but now it's water and it's yellow water, but I still like it like just not really I think.
It used to be like sprinkles, but it's not anymore... because... because I don't know! It just changes.
Researcher: Which did you like best?
The sprinkles. Because we can make cupcakes with them and it's funny.

Figure 22. It just changes (Child 45, InPhoTour).

> The houses [huts] back. (Conversations using puppets, Child 41)

> I would maybe like those types of building block shapes, maybe each of those could have like a basket and types of animals. Like the reptiles in one basket and the … in the other basket, and the Africa animals in the other basket. (Child 23, InPhoTour)

From the above InPhoTour comment, it appears that this child was not just considering the resources, but also making suggestions for how the resources may be organised.

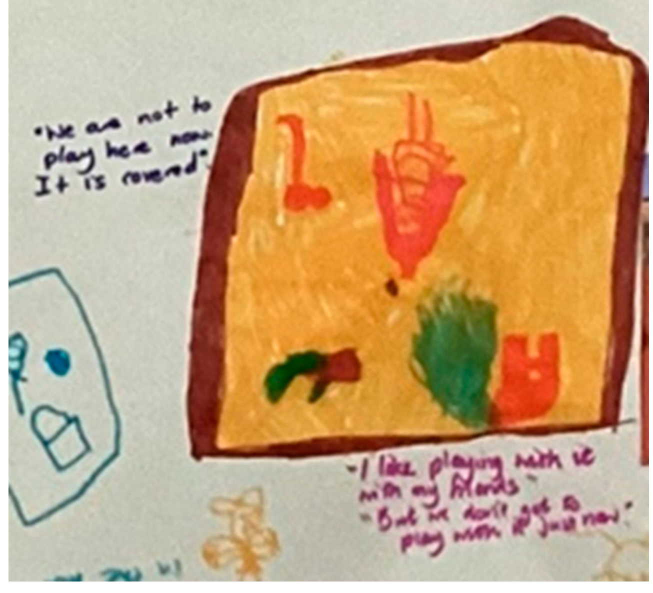


Figure 23. We are not to play here now. It [sandpit] is covered (Mapping).

The data built a narrative of children's wellbeing being impacted when their voices were not listened to about their outdoor environment, yet children remained keen to share their voices and have them heard, and, similarly, the school wanted to learn about how to listen to children's voices. These findings also highlight the importance of educators listening to children's voices in relation to their environment (learning or physical) (Akyol 2020). As highlighted by Lundy (2007), it is not only important to provide space for voice, it needs to be listened to and acted upon. In this instance, there was likely a mismatch between the school recognising that they need to get better at listening to children's voices (as evidenced by inviting the team) but there still being some long-standing procedures and barriers to this happening at that particular moment.

Another prominent strand was about children's perception of various ways in which their space is governed and limited by rules, restrictions and other factors out-with their control. A theme running throughout the week was which play spaces children were and were not 'allowed' to be in (Figures 23 and 24).

> Our teacher doesn't let us in the trees anymore but I still – I can still see the trees fae here. (Conversations using puppets, Child 41)

> Normally I play with Lego but the Lego's on the shelf now. (Conversations using puppets, Child 41)

This demonstrates the lack of power children felt they had over their play spaces and supports the assertion by Akyol (2020) that children believe decisions in school are taken by adults. Interestingly, when we spoke to the teachers about these areas, the teachers did not always agree that certain areas were off limits to the children. Perhaps, whilst the 'off limits' spaces and resources were not communicated explicitly to the children, teachers were implicitly transmitting their views through their daily classroom practices, feedback and pedagogies without realising it (e.g. Pajares 1992).

Conclusions and implications

Despite collecting rich data and filling gaps found in previous research, there are limitations of the study that need to be considered. A limitation of this study, and of doing research with children in general, is that parents and carers had the power from the outset to agree or refuse to let their child participate in the study. There were some children who wanted to participate, but were unable to do so. To compensate for this, the researchers showed the staff the technology they used for the InPhoTours (and demonstrated how this could be done using the school's current observation practices), and gave children the opportunity to engage with the floorbook and drawing activities, even though the data was not used. The research team also shared the giant 'map' of the space on the main play space wall for all children to continue to contribute to if they wished.

I liked this cos it's a different class. I'm not allowed in that area, any of us are not allowed in that area, and I like it, so much. Sometimes when people are not here, we can go to that bit. See when we get playtime at the end of the day we get to go also.

(Child 27 and 20, InPhoTour)

Ken why I don't like about this? Cos it said you're not allowed to go inside of it, only the teachers can go inside of it. Cos it's got full of toys and hammers and tools and stuff.

Researcher asked, 'How do you know that's what's inside it, if you're not allowed in?'

Because we were helping tidy up, and we sawed it.

Figure 24. Any of us are not allowed in this that area (Child 27, Child 20, InPhoTour).

Further, although school staff were keen to participate, they could not due to staffing issues during that week. This limited the teachers' involvement to before and after the project sessions, and daily huddles with the researchers. When considering Lundy's model, therefore, it could only really be considered that the first two dimensions underpinned this study, not all four as ultimately the teachers were the audience and could determine the influence; it is not known at this stage whether, and how, the school will act in line with children's voices.

Nevertheless, this study provided some unique insights to answer the research question 'What is it like to be in this space?'. In line with the theorisation and conceptualisation of voice as a 'social and multi-dimensional construct', we used a variety of playful and creative data collection methods to capture the variety of ways through which young children may wish to have their voices heard. The multi-methods approach was found to be effective as children told us through their 'hundred languages' that the space itself was not as important as the relationships and dynamics that played out within it. This reinforces the view that, for children, play is an inherently social activity. Relationships (positive or negative) appeared to evoke strong feelings about play spaces and were at the heart of choices children made. Interestingly, however, children's relationships with the adults in their play spaces were not a theme evident in the data.

Despite the importance of relationships between children, ultimately, children ventured into their play space as individuals, and tended to use their voices to display a strong sense of self and often a sense of belonging to their families and communities. Through their voices and actions, children 'lived' out their own feelings, self-beliefs, experiences and memories.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a strong theme arising from the data was that of children's voices. What was surprising, however, was the complex juxtaposition this revealed. Data highlighted that children's voices were not being listened to in the creation of their play space and that they did not have ownership of it. However, children did not appear to challenge this in any way; they accepted the status quo, especially with regards to indoor spaces with no indication or belief that they should have agency over 'their' space. The one exception to this was when the outdoor playground huts were removed. The children were visibly upset, unhappy and vocal about this. The Headteacher had arranged for the huts to be cleared because they were deemed unsafe, and to create space so that children's ideas from this project could be actioned. However, children were not **made** aware of this which led to feelings of disempowerment, the opposite of what the school had set out to do.

The lack of agency experienced by children was also reflected through the extensive comments from children regarding the areas where they were not permitted to go, and an unequivocal acceptance about these 'off-limits' areas. What was surprising, was anecdotal comments from teachers (during the daily huddle) who did not seem to agree that children were not permitted to be in certain spaces. It is possible, that whilst the off-limits play spaces and resources were not communicated explicitly to the children, teachers might be transmitting their views through their daily classroom practices, feedback and pedagogies.

Lastly, data indicated that opportunities for creativity were an important way in which children's play space was used. Whether the space was sparse (outdoors), or filled with resources (indoors), children's imaginations were present. The area which the school wanted to change most of all (outdoors), was the area in which children displayed the greatest amount of 'possibility thinking' and imaginative play across all of the play spaces. The greater the number of resources, the more the children played with those resources in a 'fixed' way. The fewer the resources, the more the children engaged their imaginations.

Implications for practice and research

The core purpose of school improvements is to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. Therefore, their voices should be listened to and acted upon to inform and influence change within school settings and communities. Further, children have different ways of expressing their

voices; there is no set blueprint for how this should happen. This study highlights a range of methods which educators can adapt, individualise, and incorporate into their pedagogical toolkits. No one method will be appropriate for every child, class, space or environment. When listening to children's voices, teachers should consider enacting all four of Lundy's elements, to avoid listening to voices in a tokenistic way.

Knowing children as individuals, and understanding the relationships they have with each other, are other important factors when considering how children engage with their play spaces. With this in mind and given the move towards enabling environments and spaces for play throughout all stages of school, it seems important for teachers to carry on prioritising pedagogies of relationships and wellbeing.

However, in line with what children suggested in this study, there is a fine line for teachers to tread. On the one hand, teachers have an important role in encouraging and scaffolding children's interrelationships and social dynamics. On the other hand, children deserve to feel ownership over their play spaces, and to not have an adult presence, otherwise they might not be able to take ownership. The play space needs to be reflected on, created and facilitated with social relationships in mind.

This research has implication for researchers, such as, in ways of listening to young children's voices, providing them agency over which methods to use, and how to enable informed and ongoing assent. Further, various data collection methods employed in this study could be critiqued and developed in terms of their promise of listening to children; most importantly asking the children to share their perceptions of the effectiveness of the methods. This will help guard against the risk of complacency among researchers that they have achieved their aim of magnifying children's voices.

Originality and significance

This study makes original and significant contributions which have the potential to impact research and practice with young children internationally. This study is original in not only using multiple developmentally appropriate data collection methods, but also ensuring that children had the autonomy to choose which of those methods they would like to use to have their voices heard. Further, this study demonstrates how one can actually listen to the voice of a relatively large sample of children ($n = 45$) *and* use multiple methods of data collection synchronously by introducing a team of researchers. It also advances the field by designing and implementing a Playful Research Ethics Framework (PREF) to support and inform the delivery of research ethics sessions with young children internationally, which can also be incorporated as good practice ethics sessions in nurseries and primary schools.

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