

*Voices of Young Children aged 3-7 years in Educational Research: An International Systematic*

*Literature Review*

**Abstract**

Although the importance of listening to young children's voices is acknowledged in international literature, it is not clear whether educational researchers *really* listen to them and if they do, what research designs and methods facilitate that. Therefore, using the EPPI-centre approach (2007), a systematic literature review was undertaken of all papers published between 2015-2020 that indicated the author/s had listened to young children's (3-7year-old) voices. The aim was to identify, appraise and synthesize international research focused on listening to their voices, and the research designs, methods of data collection and theoretical framework authors have used to achieve this. From the 74 studies that met the inclusion criteria we found that there was some evidence of listening to young children's voices. However, there was a tendency to use adult-led methods rather than child-led methods along with the use of adult data sources for confirmation. Further, in many studies no specific theoretical framework was used. Based on our review of reviews, it is evident that this is the first international systematic review of its kind and provides unique insights that are relevant to researchers, professionals and policy makers internationally.

**Key Words**

Systematic Literature Review, Theory, Research Designs, Methods, Children, Voices

## Introduction

The publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC: United Nations 1989) and in particular Article 12, created an impetus to focus social efforts on ensuring that (young) children are seen as competent individuals who have their own experiences, knowledge and understanding of their world, in addition to having the right to have a *voice* in a range of contexts (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2013), including research. Whilst the UNCRC is widely used as an international and global framework to ensure (young) children's rights in many areas including health, family and education, it has also been a useful legislation guiding adults' efforts to ensure (young) children's participation in decision-making (Tisdall and Punch 2012) and inform research and practice with young children (MacNoughton and Smith 2008). However, this framework also has limitations. The UNCRC seems to lack accuracy in the definition of some of the terms used within the articles (Beazley et al., 2009). It does not take into account cultural diversity (Roche 2004) and UNICEF does not demand global governments to ratify this treaty; countries can express reservations regarding specific articles not in line with their culture or government policies (Killkelly and Lundy 2006). However, and despite its limitations, this convention puts forward an internationally recognised rights-based approach which allows us to acknowledge a wide diversity of childhoods around the world. This also translates into a diversity of voices rather than developing a universal concept of childhood.

*Voice* can be conceptualised as a social and multidimensional construct which evolves through time (Flynn, Shevlin, and Lodge 2012; Komulainen, Korhonen, and Raty 2013). The conceptualisation of (young) children's voices is shaped by ideologies, cultural beliefs and theories (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2013), requiring a socio-cultural perspective (Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978) and thus presenting a problem with the use of terms such as 'child's voices' universally without clear definition by the authors for the relevant context and study. Although researchers might indicate the inclusion of young children's voices in their research due to their perception of it being an ethical and moral imperative (Jindal-Snape 2016), arguably, the increase in the use of the term in research is not accompanied by clear mechanisms to move beyond tokenistic attempts (Flynn, Shevlin, and

Lodge 2012). Indeed, Lundy (2007) argues that for young children to be meaningfully heard 'voice is not enough'; young children must be given the opportunity (space) and must be facilitated (voice) to contribute, with that contribution listened to (audience) and acted upon (influence). Lundy and McEvoy (2011) go further in exploring (young) children's rights to *information* to *inform* their views, *in formation*. It is, therefore, vital to understand whether researchers have employed appropriate research designs and methods of data collection to meaningfully facilitate young children's voices and, in line with Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide's (2013) argument, which theoretical frameworks have been used in that research.

This systematic review aims to identify research that has used methodologies that listen to young children's voices. Within the review we sought out international studies that took place between 2015 and 2020. We then appraised and finally synthesised and present here the research designs, methods of data collection and any theoretical frameworks that were used in those studies. This is a valuable addition to the literature, and to this special issue, in the following ways: in the first instance, it offers an overview of methods used in current research in listening to young children's voices. Within this, it also offers an appraisal of such methods and designs. Moreover, it is useful in contextualising further research in this area, within this special issue and beyond. Research into eliciting young children's voices, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, established the important contribution which could be made through engaging their voices (Flynn, Shevlin and Lodge 2012). Emerging in the 1990s and early 2000s, was the recognition that voices could be utilised and be the basis for action (Cook-Sather 2014; Flynn et al. 2012). Subsequent educational research which utilises young children's voices has developed, proliferated, and diversified (Cook-Sather 2014; Flynn et al. 2012).

However, caution is required. Working with 'voices' may not be as easy as this increasing popularity may suggest (Ruddick and Fielding 2006). There are risks that working with 'voices' simply becomes another tool through which individuals are not recognised, young children are treated as a homogenous group and, consequently, through which elicitation of their voices further oppresses them (Bragg 2007; Cook-Sather 2007). Children are individuals with unique voices rather than one collective voice and

adults, including researchers, need to recognise and understand the many ways children communicate in order to hear their messages (Murray, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to be critical, to reflect on the processes and the role of young children and adults purporting to listen to young children's voices.

Arguably, research seeking to utilise voices aims to empower young children and to transform their experiences, learning and lives and indeed authentic, transformative practice in education requires a commitment to engaging with the voices of young children (Fielding 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004; Flynn, Shevlin and Lodge 2011). The process must be credible to the children involved (Rudduck and Fielding 2006) and should not be tokenistic e.g. using discussion with children to confer legitimacy on processes and outcomes (Spyrou 2011). One may argue that when the agenda has already been set and the discussions are "framed and articulated" by adults (Fielding 2004, 306-307), without power differentials being addressed (Noyes 2005) the young children are not being meaningfully engaged and their voices are not heard.

Within our systematic review then, we looked to understanding voices, and the requirements for meaningful engagement of young children, through the lens of Article 12 of the UNCRC as explored by Lundy (2007) and Lundy and McEvoy (2011). In fact, Article 12 which sets the tone for (young) children to have their views expressed in matters that affect their lives (MacNoughton and Smith 2008), also reflects the child's participatory right which can serve as a powerful notion to investigate the mechanisms through which the views of (young) children are heard in different areas including educational research. Whilst we acknowledge that UNCRC covers widely many aspects of children's rights, we consider that article 12 represents a powerful framework to explore how methods implemented in educational research actually listen to young children's voices and the extent to which current theoretical frameworks are structured for young children to express their views. By focusing the present study on many UNCRC articles, we would be at risk of lacking depth and breadth when analysing young children's voices. This emphasis is very much in line with the ideas of MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith (2007) regarding the growing interest in informing policy by using (young) children's voices.

Children recognise that their involvement should be genuine, useful and make a 'difference' (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010). Particularly relevant to our findings is Fielding's (2004) exploration of Humphries' (1994) ideas of anti-discriminatory and empowering practice in research. Fielding identifies the risks of 'accommodation' (Humphries, 1994, in Fielding 2004) where involvement of (young) children in the research "bind(s) them more securely to the status quo" (Fielding 2001a, p. 103; 2004 p. 302) and 'accumulation' (Humphries 1994) suggesting that the involvement of (young) children by researchers does not empower those children, but rather serves researchers' agenda of 'accumulating' deeper understanding of those being researched. Where we see evidence of young children included only through and within the agenda of adults, and particularly where young children's contribution is 'checked against' other data and adult views, the use of voices does not empower young children within research. It is pertinent to mention here that while we acknowledge that Fielding's aforementioned work focuses primarily on school-age children (aged 5+), the concepts raised by his work can equally be applied to eliciting the voices of younger children (in this instance 3-7 years of age).

## **Review of reviews**

We undertook a review of reviews to inform the systematic literature review reported in this paper. Using key terms 'child', with 'voice', 'perspectives' and 'views', and 'literature review', we found five literature reviews undertaken by Curtin (2001), Davies and Wright (2008), Zhang (2015), Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor (2018), and Grace, Knight, Baird, et al. (2019). Between them, the five reviews covered literature from 1996 to 2018, however one did not mention the time period.

### **Scope of existing literature reviews**

The scope of those reviews was limited by authors in several ways, including: (i) geography, one review focussed on Australian literature (Grace et al. 2019) and one on Australian and New Zealand (Zhang 2015); (ii) characteristics and demographics, for example, one review focussed on children in care, those who had a disability or mental health issues (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2018); one focussed on research on looked after children's view of mental health services (Davies and Wright 2008) and one

on specific service sectors (Grace et al. 2019). Curtin's (2001) study did not provide information about their methodology or criteria; however, it was published in an occupational therapy journal suggesting a particular focus; (iii) type of methodology of included papers, for instance Bradbury-Jones, et al. (2018) and Grace et al. (2019) focussed on studies indicating that they undertook participatory research, with Bradbury et al. also limiting the literature to those who had undertaken qualitative research. Therefore, the existing literature reviews were quite narrow in scope and it was important to undertake a literature review that had a broader scope. Given the timeline of the existing literature reviews and taking into account gaps in terms of literature they had focussed on, it seemed pertinent to focus on international literature published between 2015-2020, regardless of the methodology used by the authors, and with a focus on education research.

#### Methodology used in existing reviews

The existing literature reviews also varied in terms of the methodology they had used. Authors of two reviews reported that they had undertaken a systematic literature review (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2018; Zhang 2015), one a scoping review (Grace et al. 2019), one did not mention specifically the nature of their review but included search methods and inclusion criteria within a narrative review (Davies and Wright 2008), and one seemed to be a narrative review that focussed more on strategies to listen to children's voice in practice (Curtin 2001). The quality and transparency of the methodology varied, with databases and inclusion criteria not explicitly listed in every review. Further, not all reviews reported the age of children in the research they had included, with it varying from 0-5 years (Zhang 2015) to mention of children *and young people* (Bradbury-Jones, Isham, and Taylor 2018; Grace et al. 2019). Therefore, it was imperative that we undertake a robust and systematic literature review, with transparent methodology including clear definition of key terms, age of children, databases, inclusion criteria, and cross-team quality checks. Further, not all of the previous reviews had focussed on key aspects such as the theoretical framework of the reviewed studies, the range of research designs used, the methods of data collection and the evidence of research claiming to listen to young children's views actually doing so. Therefore, it was considered important that these aspects were included in our systematic literature review.

Building on the existing literature reviews with a view to enhancing quality, reach and international significance, the systematic literature review presented within this paper aimed to identify, appraise and synthesize international research focused on listening to young children's voices, and the research designs, methods of data collection and theoretical framework authors had used for this. For the purposes of this paper, young children is the term we will use throughout the manuscript to refer to ages 3-7.

The research questions were:

1. What evidence is there in the literature of listening to young children's voice in educational research?
2. What are the most commonly used research designs in the literature in order to listen to young children's voice?
3. What are the most commonly used methods of data collection to listen to young children's voice in educational research?
- 4.- What are the most widely used theoretical frameworks to explore young children's voice in educational research?

## **Methodology**

This study followed the methodological approach for systematic literature reviews recommended by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) (2007) with a view to providing robust evidence of the studies which focus on listening to young children's voice in educational research. As we were able to identify a large number of relevant peer-reviewed studies published in the last six years, we did not consider relevant to undertake a scoping review or to expand the inclusion criteria for other types of literature. The EPPI-centre approach was used as it is a rigorous approach to reviewing and synthesising research evidence (EPPI 2019) and provides robust evidence that can support the development of "evidence-informed policy in the field of education" (Oakley et al. 2005, p.5).

We followed a seven-step process.

### ***1. Scoping the review and deciding on the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

A robust process to decide these criteria was in place as follows. Firstly, our review of reviews led us to develop a thorough understanding of the latest developments as well as the scarcity of studies in this field. We further identified relevant studies by reviewing the reference list of the reviews found which led us to further identify seminal studies in the field. Secondly, we conducted an initial thorough review of the literature to analyse the wording used in studies which claimed to listen, those which did not and those which indeed, listened to young children's voices. Thirdly, we conducted a thorough search of the databases selected by testing phrases and terms in search engines, which helped us develop a greater understanding of the definition and use of these concepts in the international literature. This helped us locate the most relevant studies that could help us address our research questions. Additionally, we focused on specific aspects (see Table 1) including relevance, recency, transparency and reliability/validity to ensure that the studies included were relevant to the present study. These criteria were selected specifically because they allowed us to assess the weight of evidence, following Gough's (2007) ideas, in order to identify rigour in the evidence provided based on the methodological quality, methodological relevance and topic relevance.

**Table 1 Inclusion Criteria**

<b>Criterion Type</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>
<b>Topic</b>	Literature must relate to the main aims of the present study (e.g., children voices, perspectives, experiences, preschool, primary school, etc.)
<b>Recency</b>	Literature should have been published between 2015 and 2020
<b>Age-Range</b>	Literature should relate to 3-7 year old children
<b>Geographical Spread</b>	Literature from different countries around the world will be included as long as the language in which it is published is English



<b>Research Base</b>	Literature must be based upon empirical research (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods) and must be published in peer-reviewed journals
<b>Transparency</b>	The methodology used for the studies analysed must be explicit
<b>Reliability and Validity</b>	As far as can be determined, the findings upon which the literature is based must be valid and reliable in the context of that study's methodology

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## **2. *Search of Studies***

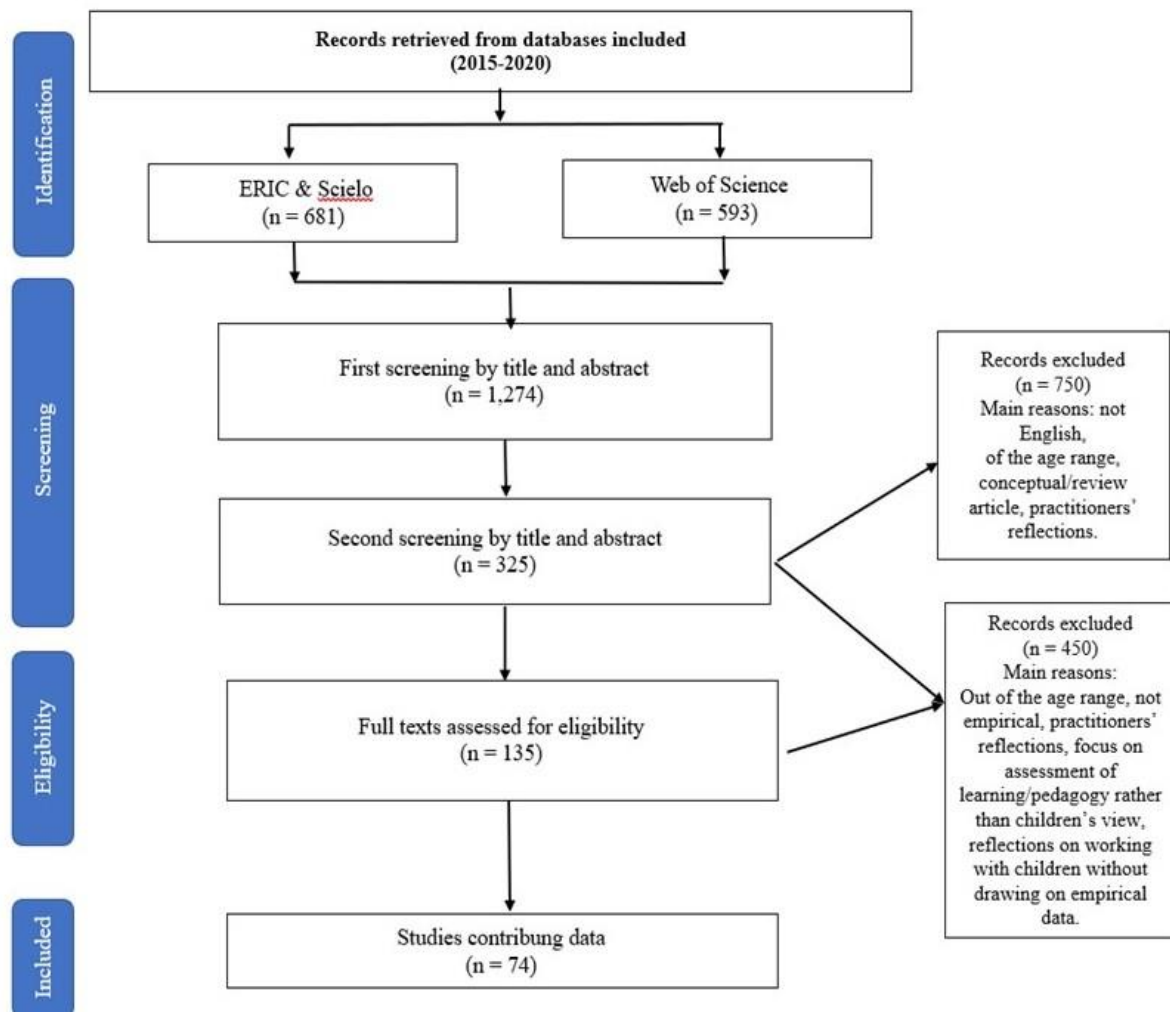
We undertook a review of reviews to inform the key search terms for the present study. Some of the search terms used in existing reviews were used (e.g., child) but some were rejected to take cognisance of the age range of this special issue (e.g., Grace et al. 2019 and Bradbury et al. 2018 also looked at teenagers, young people). In line with our research questions, we used the term 'voice', and to make sure we included international literature, international educational systems were considered and terms like 'nursery', 'kindergarten', 'preschool' etc. were used to represent formal settings that young children inhabited. We searched three main databases including a wide range of journals indexed in ERIC, SciELO and Web of Science. We used Boolean operators to ensure the inclusion of papers with the terms searched, using a combination of terms child AND views AND voice AND experiences AND perspective AND nursery AND kindergarten AND elementary AND preschool AND primary school. This led to the identification of 1274 studies (see Figure 1, PRISMA Flow Diagram).

## **3. *Screening studies***

Each study was screened against the criteria outlined in Table 1 giving a consistent set of elements to ascertain the studies which needed to be included in this review. This was carried out in a collaborative way among researchers, with each publication year assigned to at least two researchers, ensuring that the screening process was robust. Researchers cross-checked criteria, articles and decisions at different stages to enhance the rigour of the process, beyond the team of two. Of the studies identified, 1200 studies were excluded for a range of reasons including: the age of children

was not described or within the scope; conceptual/review article; practitioners' reflections; a focus on assessment of learning/pedagogy rather than young children's views (see Figure 1 Prisma Flow Diagram). To ensure the robustness of the literature review, each study was screened by at least two researchers, including both during abstract screening and full paper screening.

**Figure 1 Prisma Flow Diagram**



***Describing and mapping***

A grid was drawn up by the researchers (see Table 2) summarising different elements of the studies including focusing on the context, mechanism, outcome, transparency of methodology and weight of evidence (Davies et al. 2013), which helped address the main aims of the present study. This provided a systematic description of the research undertaken in relation to the research questions, allowing for further cross-checks.

**Table 2 Elements of analysis to summarise studies and address the four main aims of the present study**

<b>Element of analysis</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Context of Study</b>	Where the study was conducted
<b>Mechanism to listen to children's voices</b>	How children's voice was listened to
<b>Outcome of listening to children's voices</b>	The effects of listening to children's voices
<b>Transparency of methodology</b>	The authors of the studies made clear the research design, sample, aims etc.
<b>Weight of evidence</b>	Evaluation of the Methodological quality, methodological relevance and topic relevance based on Davies et al. (2013) (see Table 3).

#### 4. *Quality and relevance appraisal*

Each researcher assessed each study in terms of context, mechanism, outcomes from listening to children's voices, transparency of methodology and weight of evidence (see Table 3). The latter element was of the utmost importance in this review as it followed specific criteria suggested by Davies et al. (2013). When researchers were in doubt about any particular quality-related aspect of a given study, two other members of the authorship team analysed and reached a mutual agreement and this was verified by a third researcher when necessary. This helped us ensure a robust process of analysis.

**Table 3 Criterion for Weigh of evidence used to assess the quality of the papers included**

Level/criterion	Methodological quality	Methodological relevance	Topic relevance
1: Excellent	Excellent research design with clear justification of all decisions: e.g., sample, instruments, analysis. Clear evidence of measures taken to maximise validity and reliability.	Research questions (RQ) clearly stated. Methodology is highly relevant to their RQs and answers them in detail.	Study is very closely aligned to one of the key review objectives and provides very strong evidence upon which to base future policy/action.
2: Good	Research design clearly stated with evidence of sensible decisions taken to provide valid and reliable findings.	RQ are explicit or can be deduced from text. Findings address RQs.	Study is broadly in line with one of the key review objectives and provides useful evidence.
3: Satisfactory	Research design may be implicit but appears sensible and likely to yield useful data.	RQs implicit but appear to broadly matched by research design and findings.	At least part of the study findings is relevant to one of the key review objectives.
4: Inadequate	Research design not stated and contains flaws.	RQs not stated or not matched by design.	Study does not address any key research objective.

*Source: Davies, Jindal-Snape, Collier, Digby, Hay & Howe (2013)*

#### 5. *Synthesizing study findings*

By using the Narrative Empirical Synthesis approach (EPPI-Centre 2007), the researchers brought together their appraisal of individual studies, to create thematic headings summarising the key common characteristics of each study (i.e., context, mechanism, outcome, transparency of

methodology and weight of evidence) and their relevant contribution to address the four main research questions of the present study. All researchers engaged in a critical review of the thematic headings to ensure these reflected the true nature of the analyses carried out by each researcher. When researchers were in doubt of any particular thematic heading, two other members of the authorship team analysed and reached a mutual agreement.

## **6. *Conclusions/recommendations***

Through an iterative process of review, the authorship team engaged in a constant analysis of the conclusions reached derived from the analysis of individual studies. Following a constant process of constructive discussion and feedback, agreements were reached whenever was needed. This led to proposing a set of recommendations provided paying close attention to issues related to transferability and generalisability of the findings. Limitations and implications for research, policy and practice were also discussed.

## **Results and Discussion**

After the general overview of the studies, the results are presented in line with the four research questions of this study. For brevity, we have not cited every paper in each sub-section, however a full list can be found in the supplemental file.

As mentioned earlier, 74 studies published between 2015 and 2020 met the inclusion criteria for this study.

### **Overview of the reviewed studies**

The weight of evidence of each study was assessed using a 1-4 scale as suggested by Davies et al. (2013) (Table 3). The majority of studies included in this review provided satisfactory or good evidence, accurately describing the research design, research questions, decisions taken to conduct the study and alignment with one of the key review objectives providing useful evidence. However, and despite the fact that the majority of studies fell into this category, there were studies which lacked

clarity when describing the research questions (Katz, McLeigh, and El szwec 2017), sample (i.e., age of children), analytical procedure (Fleer and Li 2016), analysis of young children's voices (i.e., sometimes meaning was not explored), researchers' bias (i.e., researchers reporting only positive aspects during focus group, however the social influence of interaction during focus groups was not analysed, see e.g. Sandberg et al. 2017) and, sometimes, researchers did not report the findings from all the methodological strategies they used to elicit young children's voices (see McEvilly 2015).

Most of the studies included in this review were conducted in the UK and rest of Europe (including Cyprus and Turkey), with some research undertaken in Australasia and, to a lesser extent, in North America (i.e., a few studies in Canada and the US, but not Mexico). However, we found only one study conducted in Africa and none in Latin America. This might be indicative of a lack of studies in this area from other countries or due to our inclusion criteria of including articles written in English language only. It is acknowledged, however, that this needs to be addressed in future research to confidently ensure and claim representation of all contexts.

### ***Evidence in the educational research literature of listening to young children's voice***

Results of the analysis revealed that there is indeed some educational research focused on listening to young children's voices, experiences or perspectives. Nevertheless, the systematic search reveals the scarcity of such studies. Those which have taken place have predominantly been in the context of primary schools in urban or rural areas (e.g., Baroutsis et al. 2019; Brown and Allmond 2020; Carter and Bath 2018; Fleer and Li 2016), although there was a range of contexts in which researchers listened to young children voices, including early childhood education centres (ECEC) (e.g., Ree, Alvestadt, and Johansson 2019; Viskovic and Višnjić-Jevtić 2020), kindergartens (Rekalidou 2016; Wu 2019) and day-care centres (Gehret et al. 2019). There is very limited use of home or the children's life outside 'institutions' as the context (e.g., Chao and Ma 2019; Ledger and Merga 2018; White 2015).

Results suggest that listening to young children's voices, working with, rather than acting for young children (Bragg 2007), has great potential to illuminate young children's interests, ideas or views – sometimes even challenging adult thinking - in a range of topics or concepts including writing and reading (Baroutsis et al. 2019; Ledger and Merga 2018), daily life (Odenbring 2018) and engaging in outdoor spaces and nature (e.g., Kumpulainen et al. 2020; Moore, Morrissey, and Robertson 2019). Notably, listening to young children also provided insights into more abstract concepts such as learning (Ruscoe, Barblett, and Barrett-Pugh 2018), fairness, stereotypes, friendships and social relationships (e.g., Demetriou 2019; Martin and Buckley 2020).

Analysis of the studies reveals a range of positive outcomes arising from listening to young children. Through this type of research, researchers realised that there are important differences between adults and young children related to their conceptualization of learning (Colliver and Flear 2016) and play (McInnes 2019); between young children's preferences - what they value - and their experiences of existing classroom practice (Baroutsis et al. 2019; Ruscoe, Barblett, and Barratt-Pugh 2018); in young children's ideas of broader concepts such as fairness, poverty, and racism (Srinivisan and Cruz 2015); factors that make young children happy or unhappy about their classroom (Adderley et al. 2015); strategies young children use to cope with bullying at school (Harwood and Copfer 2015); and young children's ideas about child protection (Katz, McLeigh, and El szwec 2017) and bullying (Ey, Walker, and Spears 2019). Perhaps not unexpectedly, listening to young children's voices revealed understandings held by children which can be overlooked by adults, including teachers and educators, for example relating to transnational understanding and teasing (Compton-Lilly et al. 2019; Harwood and Copfer 2015). We also found some evidence that research conducted with young children allowed researchers to identify advantages and limitations in the use of specific methods of data collection and research designs which will be discussed in detail next.

### ***Research designs used by studies claiming to listen to children's voice***

In the literature reviewed, we found specific research designs aimed at listening to what young children have to say predominantly from a phenomenological perspective (Creely 2018), although it

was not always identified explicitly as such. The research designs found in our review frequently relied on cross-sectional designs (e.g., Almqvist and Almqvist 2015; Gyllencreutz et al. 2020; Hatzigianni et al. 2020; Kotaman and Tekin 2017) although some studies, such as Adderley et al. (2015), Colliver and Fleeer (2016), Martin and Buckley (2020) and Merewether (2015) explicitly identified the intent to pursue a 'participatory' research approach with limitations noted (Webber 2020).

Most of the studies examined, although including young children's contributions to an extent, limited this either through adult-led designs or through an emphasis on, or inclusion of, other data sources. For example, Fleeer and Li (2016) set out to involve children as coresearchers; Katz, McLeigh, and El szwec (2017) actively sought to listen to young children. In contrast, Correia and Aguiar (2017), whilst involving young children, used a very adult-structured design. The differing roles and emphasis on adults involved in the studies, including teachers (e.g. Reunamo et al. 2015; Srinivasan and Cruz 2015), home-based educators (White 2015), research assistants (e.g. Katz, McLeigh, and El szwec 2017; Koller and San Juan 2015; Wong 2015) and to a lesser extent parents (e.g. Wernet and Nurnberger-Haag 2015) raises concerns regarding the extent to which we are truly hearing the views and voices of young children within these publications.

### ***Data collection methods used by studies aiming to listen to young children's voice***

To understand the appropriateness of methods used requires consideration of the sample size of the studies included. Sample size ranged from fewer than five (e.g., Chao and Ma 2019; Noggle and Stites 2018; Odenbring 2018) to 200 or more participants (Akyol 2020; Paños and Ruiz-Gallardo 2020; Reunamo et al. 2015). The majority of studies included in the review involved 50 or fewer participants and in some of the larger studies, only some of them but not all participants were within the age range of 3 – 7 years (e.g., Ledger and Merga 2018). Regrettably, it was not always clear from the literature how many children were within the identified age range. For example, Kumpulainen et al. (2020) included 62 children aged 7-9 but we were unable to ascertain how many of those were aged 7; similarly, Wong et al. (2020) included 12 participants aged 7-11 but we could not identify



how many were within our age range of interest for this literature review. It is worth noting that two of the largest studies reviewed included children out of the age range; for example, Ledger and Merga (2018) included 220 participants across the age range 6-12 and Baroutsis et al. (2019) included 217 participants, of whom 169 were aged 4-7 years old.

Within the studies reviewed a range of methods were employed to listen to young children's voices. We broadly categorised these as adult-led methods and child-led methods. Those which are clearly adult-led include individual structured and semi-structured interviews (i.e., interviews using question-cards, pictures, open-ended questions, photos, puppets, play-based interviews) (e.g., Correia and Aguiar 2017; Ey, Walker, and Spears 2019; Koller and San Juan 2015; Katz, McLeigh, and El szwec 2017; Pugmire and Lyons 2018; Ruscoe, Barblett, and Barratt-Pugh 2018), group interviews with or without props (e.g., Baird and Grace 2017; Hatzigianni et al. 2020), and focus groups (e.g., Dunn and Sweeney 2018; Gyllencreutz et al. 2020; Katz, McLeigh and El szwec 2017; Odenbring 2018; Sandberg et al. 2017; Srinivasan and Cruz 2015). The use of these methods could suggest potential variations in power and control and thus the extent to which young children, rather than adult researchers, were able to control the research process. Indeed, there were examples in which the approach appeared to have been designed for power differentials, e.g., by seating the child opposite the researcher in an environment other than their own educational environment (e.g., Aykol 2020), and we did not find evidence of discussion with participants around the degree of power sharing within the studies (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009). In other instances, researchers relied on observations to obtain spontaneous young children's ideas about a particular topic (e.g., Fekonja-Peklaj and Marjanovič-Umek 2015; Reunamo et al. 2015; Sisson, Whittington, and Shin 2020; Wernet and, Nurnberger-Haag 2015). Arguably, the information obtained through this medium does not necessarily reflect young children's perspectives, but rather it reflects the interpretative process of what researchers observe (Spradley 2016).

Child-led methods included young children taking photos (e.g., Almqvist and Almqvist 2015; Hammersten et al. 2019; Martin and Buckley 2020; Moore, Morrissey, and Robertson 2019;

Streelasky 2020; White 2015), drawing (e.g. Alvarez 2018; Moore, Morrissey, and Robertson 2019; O'Farrelly et al. 2020; Sisson, Whittington and Shin 2020), including using the draw-and-tell method (e.g. Wong 2015) or drawing supported by informal discussion (e.g. Wong et al. 2020), and the use of art for expression of views (e.g. Dunn et al. 2018; Leigh 2015; McEvilly 2015). Young children engaged with leading school-home or local area tours (e.g., Green 2015; Hammersten et al. 2019; Kaplun 2019; Merewether 2015) and story completion by using a range of props, such as images, cards, videos, books or dolls (e.g., Colliver and Fleeer 2016; Kotaman and Tekin 2017). Film-based discussions were included by McEvilly (2015) as child-led, although discussions were guided by researchers. In fact, many methods identified as 'child-led' were initiated and overseen by adults, arguably bringing tensions to the extent to which we really hear the voices of young children (Lundy 2007; Parsons, Iivil, Kovshoff, and Karakosta 2020). One example is young children's drawings and photos about which young children were subsequently interviewed (e.g., Everley and Everley 2019; Gehret et al. 2019; Kaplun 2019; Martin and Buckley 2020).

While most of the methods used in these studies clearly considered that there was value in obtaining young children's first-hand experiences on a range of topics, there is evidence of researchers using additional methods to gather more data to corroborate or verify young children's accounts, including analysing young children's work (e.g., Flint 2020; Hedges 2020; Jones and Seilhamer 2020; Noggle and Stites 2018; White 2016; Wu 2015). Young children's self-reporting is dependent on an age-appropriate instrument (Ledger and Merga 2018); the presence of researchers can impact upon young children's behaviours (Noggle and Stites 2018); and data obtained from semi-structured interviews expose power imbalances between young children and adults (Fekonj-Peklaj and Marjanovic-Umec 2015). We found that in some cases, researchers focussed on eliciting young children's understanding of abstract concepts (e.g., forgiveness, poverty, bullying) rather than listening to young children's experiences (Ey, Walker, and Spears 2019; Gunnestad, Mørreaunet, and Onyango 2015).

Overall, in the literature reviewed, we observed a common factor among studies whereby researchers tend to combine a range of methods to listen to young children's voices (e.g., focus groups combined

with draw-and-tell method; semi-structured interviews combined with drawings etc.), suggesting that researchers put in place mechanisms to triangulate information with a view to increasing the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell 2017; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007). There was limited, if any, evidence of seeking young children's views beyond their first-hand or lived experience, of engaging young children in ways which might help inform their voices to better facilitate the development of informed views (Lundy 2007; Lundy and McEvoy 2011).

Some studies sought young children's voices as an 'addition' to other perspectives, such as those of educators (e.g., Gyllencreutz et al. 2020; Ihmeideh 2019) or to study a phenomenon more broadly, such as the role of the school community in supporting children dealing with adversity (Mooney et al. 2020). Interestingly, we also found cases in which researchers sought to corroborate young children's perspectives by making additional observations (Wu 2015) – could young children's perspectives be wrong even in cases where the research aims to interrogate the young child's lived experience (e.g., Noggle and Stites 2018)?

### *Theoretical frameworks used by studies aiming to listen to children's voice*

We interrogated the literature to identify which studies incorporated a theoretical framework to underpin the research design. The proportion of studies utilising a theoretical framework by year is outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4 Proportion of studies utilising a theoretical framework**

Year	No of included papers	No of papers utilising a theoretical framework	No of papers <b>not</b> utilising a theoretical framework
2015	20	9 (45%)	11 (55%)
2016	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)
2017	7	4 (57%)	3 (43%)
2018	8	5 (62%)	3(38%)
2019	18	14 (78%)	4 (22%)
2020	17	9 (53%)	8 (47%)

There appears to be a trend of an increasing use of theoretical frameworks. This is based on juxtaposing the period 2015-2017 and 2018-2020. The percentage inclusion (taking account of sample size of included papers;  $n=31$ ) was 48% for the former and 65% for the latter period ( $n=43$ ). Given the variability between years, it is recommended that this should be monitored over a longer period.

The literature reviewed revealed that researchers make use of a wide range of theoretical frameworks to analyse young children's voices, and thus underpin their findings. Within the studies that articulated a theory, we found different theories used such as the Bakhtinian Theory (White 2015), Place Identity Theory and Contemporary Theories of Children as Active Agents (Green 2015), Competence and Agency (e.g., Scherer 2020), Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner (Almqvist and Almqvist 2015; Packer, Thomas, Jones, and Watkins 2020; White 2016), Foucaultian and other Post-structuralist Theoretical Frameworks (McEvilly 2015; Pugmire and Lyons 2018), Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory (Scherer 2020), Cultural-Historical Theory (Colliver and Flear 2016), Attachment Theory (White 2016), Dodge's Social Information Processing Theory (Harwood and Copfer 2015), New Sociology of Childhood (Koller and San Juan 2015; Scherer 2020), Social Studies of Childhood (Hammarsten et al. 2019), Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory (e.g. Flynn 2019), Social Domain Theory (Ey, Walker, and Spears 2019), Constructivist Theory (Dunn and Sweeney 2018), Socio-cultural Theory and Social Constructivism by Vygotsky (e.g., Wu 2015), Hermeneutical Theory (Noggle and Stites 2018), Cultural Models Theory (Sisson, Whittington, and Shin 2020), Funds of Knowledge Theory and the associated Funds of Identity (e.g., Compton-Lilly, Kim, Quast, Tran, and Shedrow 2019), Children as Social Actors (Adderley et al. 2105), Hedegaard's Holistic Conception of Perspectives (Colliver and Flear 2016), Hart's Ladder of Participation Theory and Self-determination Theory (Correia and Aguiar 2017), Ecocultural Theory (Baird and Grace 2017), models of disability (Demetriou 2019), Piagetian Theory (Hsiao and Chen 2015), Biesta's view of democracy (Ree, Alvestad, and Johansson 2019), Huizinga's Theory of play (Moore, Morrissey, and Robertson 2019), theoretical understandings of self-regulation (Gehret et al. 2019), the psychology of attitudes (Paños and Ruiz-Gallardo 2020), Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (Flint 2020), and Dewey's Inquiry-based Learning Theory (Hatzigianni et al. 2020). As mentioned earlier, the adoption of phenomenology as a

theoretical approach which influenced the research design was also mentioned in a few studies (e.g., Sirkko, Kyrönlampi, and Puroila 2019).

In order to provide a greater understanding of the range and type of theoretical frameworks employed in research aiming to listen to young children's voices, we utilised a framework developed by Overton (2015). This framework proposes that research paradigms can be conceptualised as operating at different levels with increasing complexity. At the lowest level are common sense observations of a phenomenon which a layperson might employ. At the next level are more formal theoretical frameworks which identify characteristics of a phenomenon but do not aim to predict or explain processes. At the third level are testable theories and models which seek to explain the processes underpinning a phenomenon. In the upper levels of the framework are meta-theories which have been sub-divided into mid-range meta-theories and world view meta-theories. The latter provide a philosophical worldview whereas the former set out broad conditions underpinning the phenomenon. The result of this analysis is detailed in Table 5.

**Table 5 Categorisation of the theoretical frameworks used in the studies reviewed**

Levels	
Meta-theory/World Views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phenomenology</li> <li>• Hermeneutical Theory</li> <li>• Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory</li> <li>• Competence and agency</li> </ul>
Mid-Range Meta-Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural Models Theory</li> <li>• Funds of Knowledge Theory and the associated Funds of Identity</li> <li>• Models of disability</li> <li>• Biesta's view of democracy</li> </ul>
Testable Theories and Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner</li> <li>• Attachment Theory</li> <li>• Self-determination Theory</li> <li>• Piagetian Theory</li> <li>• Constructivist Theory</li> <li>• Socio-cultural Theory and Social Constructivism by Vygotsky</li> <li>• Theoretical understandings of self-regulation</li> <li>• Dewey's Inquiry-based Learning Theory</li> <li>• Psychology of attitudes</li> <li>• Place Identity Theory</li> <li>• Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dodge's Social Information Processing Theory</li> <li>• Hedegaard's Holistic Conception of Perspectives</li> </ul>
Frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hart's Ladder of Participation Theory</li> <li>• Ecocultural Theory</li> <li>• New Sociology of Childhood</li> <li>• Social Studies of Childhood</li> <li>• Contemporary Theories of Children as Active Agents</li> <li>• Children as Social Actors</li> <li>• Huizinga's Theory of play</li> <li>• Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory</li> <li>• Bakhtinian Theory</li> <li>• Foucaultian and other Post-structuralist Theoretical Frameworks</li> <li>• Cultural-Historical Theory</li> <li>• Social Domain Theory</li> </ul>

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A total of 33 theoretical frameworks were identified in the reviewed papers. None of the frameworks were viewed as common sense observations. Focusing on more formal theories and models, 12 were categorised as frameworks and 13 were considered to be testable theories and models. At the upper levels of Overton's (2015) framework there were 8 meta-theories, which were evenly split between world view meta-theories ( $n=4$ ) and mid-range meta-theories ( $n=4$ ). Differences in the theoretical frameworks employed by researchers may well reflect their ontological and epistemological stances. Furthermore, it is likely to reflect the perceived function of the framework(s) in the study. To further investigate this, it is suggested that future research should explore how theoretical frameworks have been utilised by researchers. This could include how the framework(s) informed the rationale for listening to young children's voices, the adopted methodology (e.g., design, methods, data analysis) and interpretation of the findings.

## Conclusions

This article maps the previously unknown territory of methods and research designs employed in research aiming to elicit young children's voices, through a systematic review of the latest research in the field. This is important work as it is a prerequisite for the development of research and policy initiatives to ensure that young children's voices are genuinely heard and fairly and authentically

portrayed. In particular, this systematic review sought to identify, appraise and synthesize international research which focuses on listening to young children's voices. As this review suggests, while the UNCRC strongly emphasizes the need to listen to children, research focused on listening to (young) children's voices is scarce in the literature. Based on the results from this review, first there is a great variety of contexts in which researchers are interested in listening to young children's voices, namely early child-care centres, home, day-care centres, kindergartens and primary schools (rural and urban). Second, few studies present a theoretical framework which guided the researchers' analysis, and in many of these cases what is meant by "theoretical framework" and how this framework is used varied considerably (e.g. Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner vs Hermeneutical Theory).

Third, with regards to the methods employed, although both adult-led and children-led methods were encountered in the various studies, there is evidence of a tendency to rely on adult-led methods and/or ensuring that young children's perspectives can be corroborated through other means. In particular, few studies were effective in using child-led methods and being more participatory. In addition, there was no evidence of young children identifying the issues, and/or being involved in research design or analysis (i.e., the elements space, voice, audience and influence required for a children's rights-based voice approach, Lundy 2007; Lundy and McEvoy 2011). Instead, the tendency detected involved using combined data collection methods to listen to young children's voices (e.g., individual interviews and focus groups, or draw-and-tell method and puppets), suggesting, in turn, that researchers look for mechanisms to ensure the trustworthiness of their analyses. Nevertheless, there were some studies still undertaking observations and video recording in order to "corroborate" and/or "verify" young children's comments. A mismatch between the researchers' expectations and young children's perspectives, explaining the supposed need to corroborate the data gathered, was supported further by comments on behalf of researchers stating that "children talk about different things during interviews".

Lastly, results indicated that there seems to be a wide variation in understanding of what "counts" as participatory research. There seems to be a variation in power and control (i.e., how far young

children were able to control the research process as opposed to the adult researchers doing so). Whilst this could suggest a recognition of power differentials, arguably, this needs to be greater, considering issues such as inclusion of young children in framing the work, and in analysis and interpretation of data. In most cases, researchers take the lead and collect data directly from young children even though they are strangers to the children. However, in other instances, parents and teachers are involved in collecting data. This is an important aspect when working with young children, since it is well documented that young children disclose more information with someone to whom they feel close and secure. Although the reasons for listening to young children in educational settings are diverse, it is clear from the reviewed studies that it is important to do so, and that their perspectives might differ from those of the adults around them. The findings suggest that young children are able and willing to engage in research, however there is the need to think about innovative approaches to this end. Cross-sectional designs focusing on conducting exploratory and/or descriptive research seem to prevail in the literature analysed. Importantly, results revealed a range of positive outcomes when listening to young children voices. For instance, young children's voices challenge traditional ways of thinking about young children and adults' conceptualization of socially constructed concepts (e.g., poverty, bullying, fairness, values, friendship, racism). Listening to young children's voice, allowed researchers to identify advantages and limitations in the use of specific methodological strategies. The studies analysed, confirm previous research regarding the ability of young children to form concepts and beliefs around a range of topics from an early age (i.e., racism, poverty, fairness, food security, social justice, prejudices, stereotypes, play, learning) in addition to showing that young children (i.e., as young as 3-4 years) are experts in their own lives and learning (Clark 2004). By doing this type of research, researchers have acknowledged that there are still power dynamics impacting the research process (e.g., deciding on what is a right or wrong answer from children).

We recognise that within our synthesis of evidence from a range of eligible literature, there may be a number of limitations. Our literature review is limited to the papers that emerged from the databases we used. It is possible that we have missed some significant studies due to this, as well as due to our



choice of inclusion/exclusion criteria. An important such example is the inclusion of manuscripts in English language only; we expect that this has introduced inevitably a systematic bias to our reviewed research, as relevant work from the global south could potentially be excluded. We further support that for this to be addressed in future research one should find reliable ways in which manuscripts that are not in English can be accessed, reviewed and evaluated. While this review yielded relevant findings with the inclusion of studies within a six-year time framework, future research should include a longer time framework (e.g., 10 or 15 years), to be able to capture a wider variety of studies published in this respect.

We acknowledge that ethics is a salient and widely debated area, however a thorough investigation of this aspect in this systematic literature review was outwith the scope of this paper and should be the subject of further research. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that most papers in this review reported on consent from young children and parents, and/or formal processes of applying for ethical approval, which have been viewed by others as a way of risk management with more work required to ensure an ethical process throughout the conduct of the study which prioritises new ways of seeing the young child as “a knowledgeable agent... with full human dignity” (Harcourt & Quennerstedt, 2014, p.1).

This review has implications for research, policy and practice. At research level, it is important for researchers to consider including young children's voices within their work, and, importantly going beyond the tokenistic (Flynn, Shevlin, and Lodge 2012) to use methods through which young children can be actively involved in research projects. Moreover, in terms of implications for future research, two recommendations can be put forward from this review. Firstly, researchers working with younger children should consider including their voices in research projects about, for and from the young children, critically using some of the methods outlined in this review, but with awareness of the limitations of each one. Moving forward, there is an imperative for the creation of an inclusive and critical typology of the spectrum of methods used in the field.

Secondly, and on a more general note, adherence to clearer reporting guidelines when writing about empirical research would be useful. The extent of inadequate or incomplete reporting in terms of sample characteristics, recruiting processes, methods employed, and theoretical frameworks utilised meant that it was often difficult to extract data from studies. Following reporting guidelines, such as the REPOSE ones (Newman and Elbourne 2005), would be beneficial for comparative, and research synthesis studies like reviews and meta-analyses.

At practice level, it is crucial to have practitioner awareness of both the benefits and challenges, and thus meaning, of accessing young children's voices. On a related note, policy makers should make schools and parents aware of the importance of listening to what young children have to say. This might give them confidence to implement strategies to listen to young children's voices with a view to making them active participants in their own life and thus, follow the statement of Article 12 from the UNCRC (United Nations 1989). Implementing strategies in young children's school settings (and at home) to listen to young children's perspectives, can support not only academic performance, but crucially, personal development and well-being. Stakeholders need to be aware of the importance of having a positive attitude towards listening to young children's voices, however, this can be difficult if teachers/teaching assistants encounter barriers such as the school or wider societal culture that favours –obsessively- academic success (i.e., cognitive domain) over other domains of child development (i.e., social or emotional). School culture must change towards a recognition of the relevance of listening to what young children have to say with a view to making them active participants in decisions around their lives. Finally, there are implications for big-picture thinking and a cultural change at government level, with the potential of including even the youngest members of our society in decision making that directly affects them, in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations 1989).

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