



Charles Sturt
University

Respecting children's perspectives: Inclusive approaches to listening and learning with and from children

Associate Professor Kathy Cologon

Associate Director Children, Families and Communities,
Children's Voices Centre







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Welcome to the Charles Sturt University Children's Voices Centre



Research with, for, and about children



Our vision

A world where all children's voices are valued and heard

Our mission

To conduct world-leading, transformative interdisciplinary research with, for and about children

Our work

Guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the CVC recognises children as active experts in their own lives and works to amplify the voices of ALL children, including those most at risk of remaining unheard.



Children's Voices Centre undertakes international interdisciplinary research

SDG 3

Good health

SDG 4

Quality education

SDG 8

Decent work

SDG10

Reduced inequalities

SDG 16

Peace, justice and strong institutions

SDG 17

Partnership for the goals

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Our global research fingerprint

bit.ly/cvc-global-research





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Children Draw Health Video 2026

A Children's Advisory Group Project



Children's Voices Centre

www.csu.edu.au/research/childrens-voices-centre

"I just can say one sentence. Listen to the children, listen to children with disabilities... because it is a very, very important message and ...they are the future of our society, we have to be clear about that."

Professor Christoph Gutenbrunner (Chair, Head of Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, Hanover Medical School)

15 June 2026

Dear Finbar, Knox, Biju, Greta, Jocelyn, Zac, Chloe and Nayantara,

My name is Dr Kaloyan Kamenov, and I am the Technical Lead of the Disability Programme in the World Health Organization. I am writing to express my heartfelt gratitude for the remarkable video that you prepared for the side event *"Rights to Results: Political Prioritization of Disability Health Equity 20 Years On"* of the Nineteenth Conference of States Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 10 June 2026. This year, we marked the 20th anniversary of this important Convention. It was a historical moment to gather, reflect and plan what we should do to ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities are upheld.

Your contribution was truly extraordinary. Through your words, stories, and calls for action, you brought to life the real meaning of the Convention and reminded all of us why it matters so deeply. Your testimonies were powerful, sincere, and courageously delivered.

I want you to know that everyone in the room was deeply moved, including myself. Your voices resonated strongly, reaching beyond the screen and into the hearts of those present. Many participants commented on your impactful messages. Your perspectives brought renewed energy and purpose to our discussions and efforts to support good health care for children with disabilities. You inspired a room full of people who are working around the world towards the rights of persons with disabilities.

For me personally, your video was the highlight of this conference. It was touching to hear your calls for a more inclusive and accessible world. You reminded us that children and young people with disabilities are much more than the beneficiaries of the Convention, but powerful advocates and leaders in their own right.

Thank you for your courage, your honesty, and your commitment to making a difference for better health and health care for children with disabilities. Your voices matter, and they are helping to shape a better, more inclusive future for us all.

At the World Health Organization, our mission is to achieve health for all, and I am personally committed to ensure that children with disabilities are not left behind. Please keep speaking up, sharing your experiences, and standing up for your rights and the rights of others. The world needs your voices.

With my deepest appreciation and encouragement.



Dr Kaloyan Kamenov
Technical Lead of the Disability Programme
World Health Organization

منظمة الصحة العالمية • 世界卫生组织

Organisation mondiale de la Santé • Всемирная организация здравоохранения • Organización Mundial de la Salud



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Free to register
and participate



Children's Voices Conference 2026

1-3 September

<https://childrensvoicesconference.csu.domains/>

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Why should we gather children's perspectives?



“Children should be listened to because we are kind and loving and you can’t only listen to grown-ups because **maybe you will miss something.**”

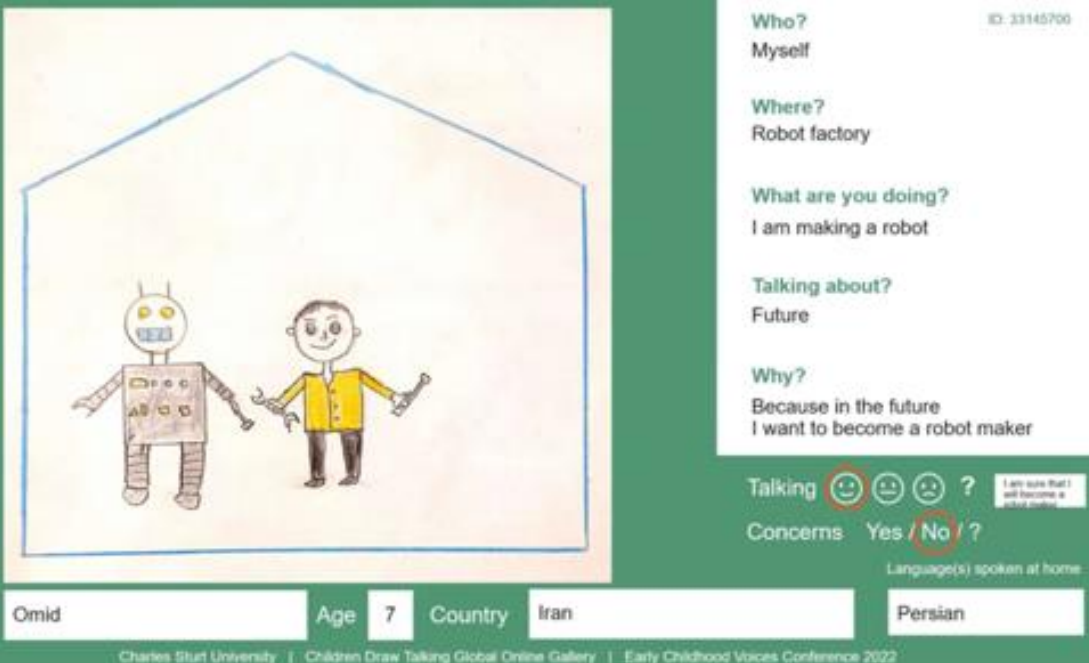
Charlotte, age 8, Australia

Why should we gather children's perspectives?

Stuff is accomplished because children have an imagination

“Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein were children once before they were adults and **that's how stuff is accomplished when they were children and had an imagination, that's how they come up with stuff,** like people who make movies, and sing and make inventions **all have an imagination from being children**”

Roarke, age 11, Australia



Who? ID: 23145700
Myself

Where?
Robot factory

What are you doing?
I am making a robot

Talking about?
Future

Why?
Because in the future
I want to become a robot maker

Talking ☒ ☐ ☐ ? I am sure that I will become a robot maker.

Concerns Yes ☒ No ☐ ?

Language(s) spoken at home:

Omid Age 7 Country Iran Persian

Charles Sturt University | Children Draw Talking Global Online Gallery | Early Childhood Voices Conference 2022

Why should we gather children's perspectives?

Rights-Based Approach

- In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, children have the right to express their views and have them acted upon (Lundy, 2007)

Experts in Their Own Lives

- Children bring unique insights into their lived experiences, which can challenge adult assumptions and inform more relevant outcomes for children (Cologon & Cologon, 2023; Cologon, 2024; Lomax & Smith, 2024)

Improved Relevance and Quality

- Involving children ensures that pedagogy, practice, and outcomes reflect children's priorities and realities, increasing validity and impact (Brooks, 2009; Cologon & Cologon, 2023; Cologon, 2024; Lomax & Smith, 2024)

Challenging Adult-Centric Assumptions

- Children's perspectives can disrupt dominant narratives and expose inequities that adults may overlook (Cologon, 2024; Griniuk, 2021)

Ethical Imperative

- Ethical, participatory engagement with children values their contributions and avoids tokenism, ensuring genuine inclusion (Cologon & Cologon, 2023; Cologon, 2024; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2019; Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013; Lomax & Smith, 2024)

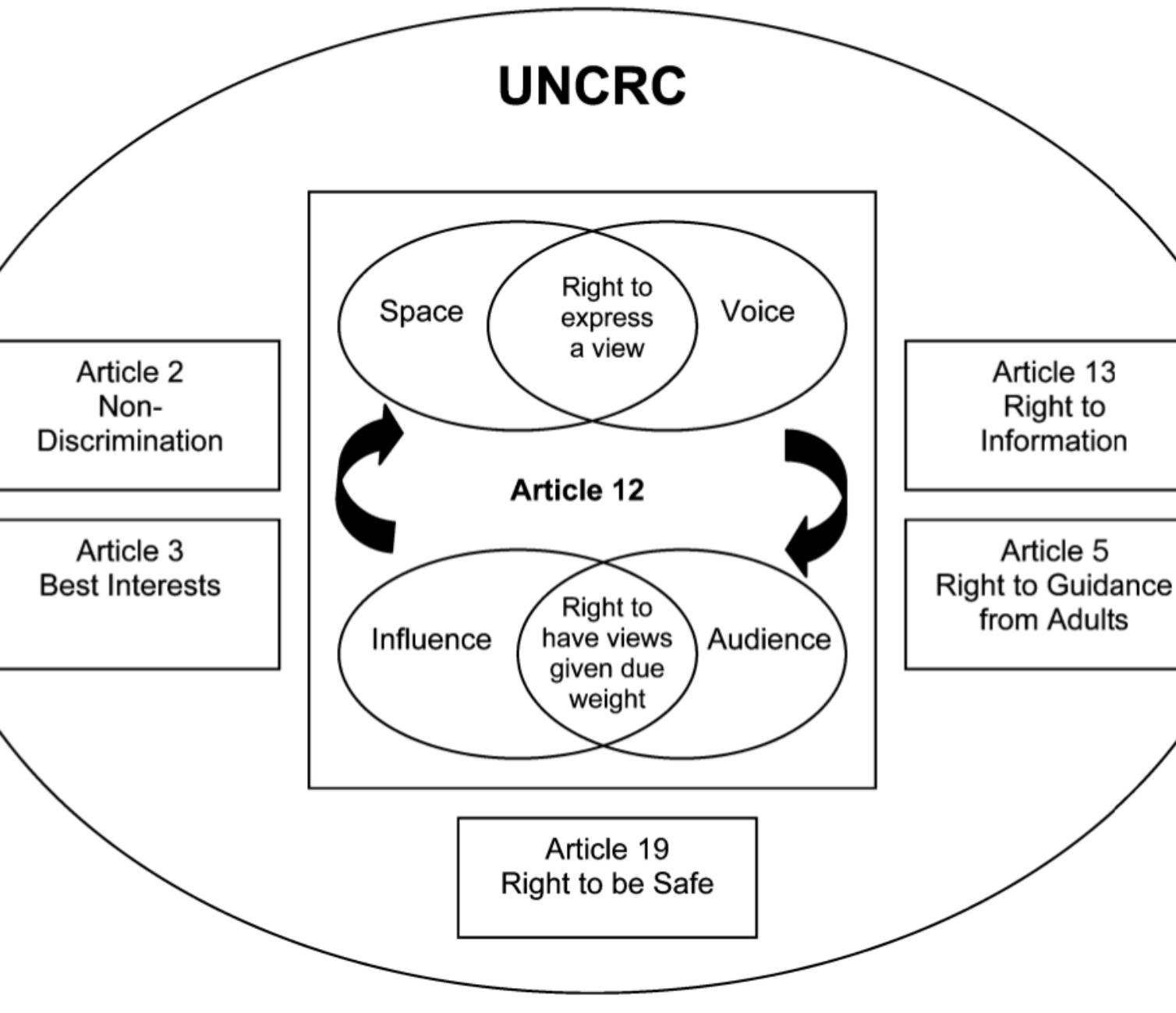
Children's participation and communication rights

Article 12: Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously

Article 13: The child shall have ... freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

United Nations (1989)





Lundy Model Space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007)

Conceptualising Article 12
[of the CRC] (Lundy, 2007).

Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation

Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view

Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views

Audience: The view must be listened to.

Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

Child-friendly arts-based methods for listening to children

Child-Friendly, arts-based Methodologies

- Inclusive
- Strengths based
- Culturally safe, respectful and sustaining
- Multi-modal
- Place Based, Context Specific
- Participatory



Ways of listening to children can include

Drawing

Photography

Videos

Questionnaires

Emoji Likert scales

Interviews

Learning on Country

Augmentative and assistive strategies

Open ended materials

Puppets



Clay

Movement

Music

Moving our bodies

Storytelling

Painting

Sign language

Weaving

Cooking

Children's literature as provocation

Cologon, K., Cologon, T., Mevawalla, Z., & Niland, A. (2019). Generative listening: Using arts-based inquiry to investigate young children's perspectives of inclusion, exclusion and disability. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(1), 54-69.

Cologon, K., & Cologon, T. (2023). Children as changemakers. In *Inclusive education in the early years: Right from the start* (pp. 29-39). Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

Cologon, K. (2024). "But Marley can't play up here!" Children designing inclusive and sustainable playspaces through practitioner research. *Sustainability*, 16(15), 6626. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16156626>

Cologon, K. (2024). Seeing, feeling and creating 'future imaginaries' within and through the visual arts. In *Inclusive Education Through the Creative Arts in the Early Years* (pp.121-136). SAGE Publications Limited.

Arts-based research methods for including children's perspectives

“Arts-related experiences allow us to engage in different ways of being, doing and knowing. [They give] children multiple ways to express themselves, and to explore their strengths, thoughts and emotions...engaging in the arts allows us to value diverse ways of communicating...to accept diverse bodies...[and] **diverse modes of expression have the power to provide 'voices' for all, regardless of age or ability.**”

(Niland, Cologon & Huhtinen-Hildén, 2024, p. 15)

Arts-based methods for generative listening

Key Principles

- Work with, not on: children as co-constructors and experts in their own lives
- Use open, flexible, emergent approaches shaped by children's choices
- Apply a social justice lens: reject deficit views of human diversity and value lived experience

Changemakers



Once upon a time...

This is a story about what we learned from you!

Once upon a time Tim and Kathy came to visit you. We wanted to learn about you and your family and your life. We also went to visit lots of other children. We talked. We signed. We listened. We played. We made art together.

Lots of children told us about their family and friends. Children told us about things they like and don't like. Children told us about school and places that they go, like the park. Lots of children told us about things they do, and things they think, and things they feel.

There was so much for us to learn about! We would like to share what we learned with other grown-ups, especially people who want to learn how to be teachers.

This story is about what we learned from you and the other children in this research project. Thank you for being part of this story!





Wishes

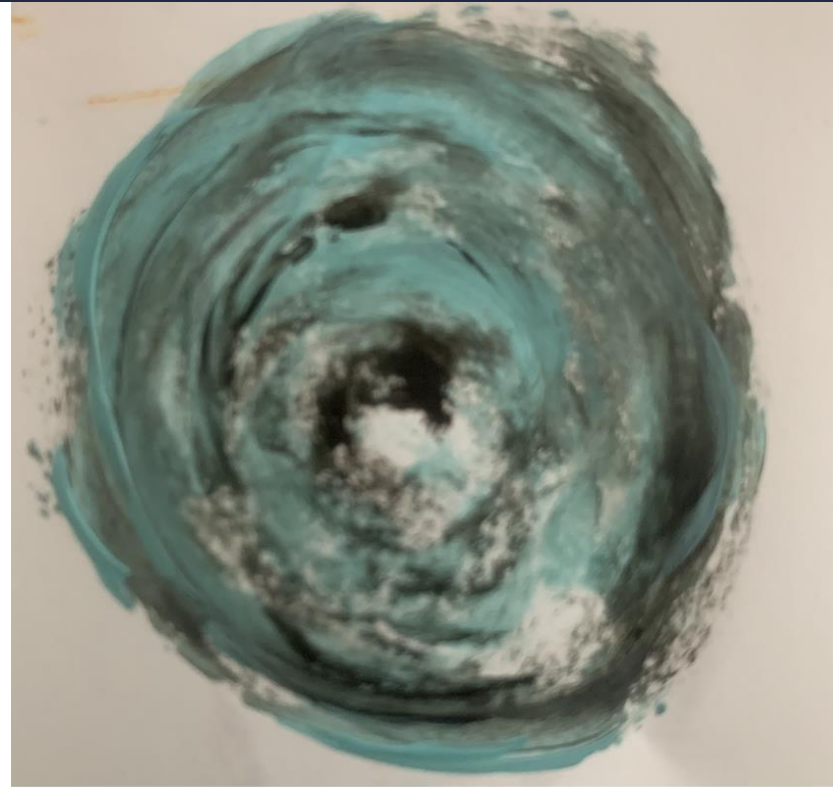
Some children wished for magical things, like to go to cloudland to see unicorns and butterflies. Some children wished for delicious things like cake (and some children told us they don't like cake at all!). Some children wished for more time to play. Some children wished to spend time with people that they love. Some people used their wish to cast a magic spell and turn us into frogs! (Thanks for turning us back into people before we went home!)

Left out

We learned that sometimes children feel left out. Children told us that this is not okay. Children told us that this is mean and sad. Children told us that no one should be left out.

Children told us that sometimes they were left out by friends. Some children told us they were left out by family. Sometimes children were left out at school.

Children told us that sometimes they had to go somewhere separate to their family and friends. Some children told us that this meant that they couldn't go to school with their brothers and sisters. Children told us that this made them feel left out.



Some children told us that they worried about the things they didn't get to do with their brothers and sisters.

Children told us that sometimes people thought they couldn't do things. They didn't ask or check, they just decided what children can and can't do. Children told us that they didn't like this.

Being different and disability

Some children talked about difference and sameness.

Some children told us about different things that they do. Some children did different things in their own way.

Some children told us people are different when they eat, they might eat different foods or eat their food in a different order, or eat in different ways. Some children noticed how their pets were different and the same, like different fur on cats.



We learned that difference is very ordinary. We learned that difference is just part of life. We learned that being different is a good thing.

Some children talked about disability. We learned that disability is a good thing. We learned that disability is part of life.

Helping other people understand

Children told us that sometimes other people don't know that disability is a good thing.

Children told us that sometimes teachers, or other children, or even people in their families think that disability is bad or sad. Children told us that sometimes this makes them feel strange or sad or angry or lonely or invisible.

Children told us that some people *need* help to understand that disability is a good thing. Children told us that sometimes *they* help people learn that disability is a good thing.



Being included

We learned that children want to belong.

Children told us that belonging means you feel happy. Children told us that belonging means other people want you to be there and you feel happy to be there too. Children told us that belonging means you are part of something. Children told us that being part of something is important.

Some children told us that it is important to be accepted. Some children told us that being accepted means that people like you as you are and don't try to change you.

Children told us that being together and doing things together is important.



Some children told us that this means being together at school, with brothers and sisters and friends and neighbours.

Some children told us that this is about spending time together. Some children told us that this is about finding things that you are interested in together.





**“Inclusion is about
everyone ...
I am a someone in
everyone”**

Adrian, 5 years

Cologon & Cologon (2023)

Being included

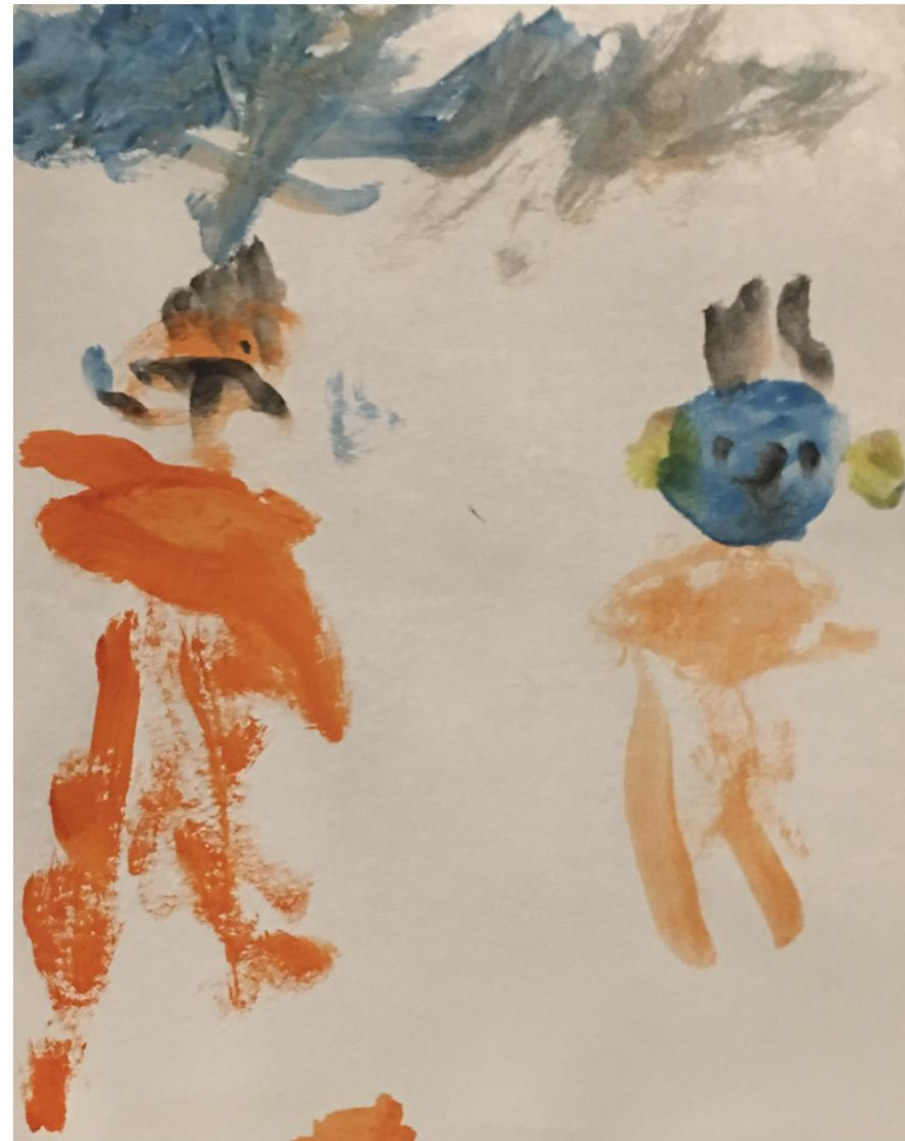
We learned that friendship is important.

Some children told us that friendship is about being together. Some children told us that friendship is about taking notice of each other. Some children told us that friendship is about having fun. Some children told us that friendship is also about being kind to each other. Some children told us that friendship means love.

Children told us that family is very important to them.

Children told us that sometimes they fight with sisters and brothers, or their parents, but mostly they love being together.

Children told us that they love their family and that they feel loved by their family.

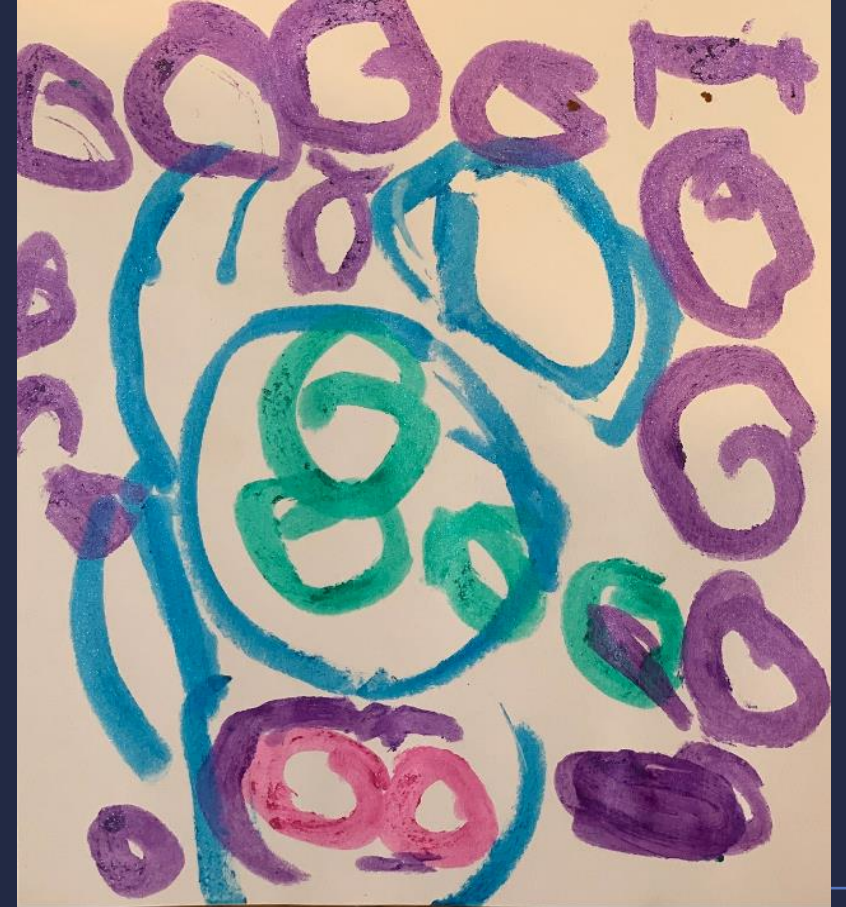


“I am not you.
You are not me.
I am me.
You are you.
We’re not the same.
We’re different,
But we’re best friends.”
Adrian

Audience and Influence: Children Together Against Loneliness, World Down Syndrome Day, March 2026



Audience and Influence: Children as Changemakers for Inclusion



The study

- Practitioner led research with 2 early childhood teachers and 4 educators and 26 children, aged 3-6 years, within a community-based early childhood setting in NSW.
- Participants used a diversity of languages and came from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Aboriginal families.
- Participants included children who do and do not experience disability, one of whom uses mobility aids; and five neurodivergent children.
- In this project, the teachers and educators chose to engage with and respond to children's concerns about justice and equity in playground accessibility.

Audience and Influence:

Children as Changemakers for Inclusion



**“It’s not fair that Marley
can’t go on the fort
because there are stairs.”**

Min, age 4

**"Yeah. The park should
be for everyone"**

Marley, age 4

How did the project unfold?

- Critical pedagogy framework
- Reflective journals
- Inclusive Arts-Based Research Methods
- Focus group discussions

Learning with and from children as activists

"I think I was aware that the access issues were unfair to Marley, and to Kai, to Ari and Min too come to think of it, but I guess I'd stopped thinking about it. You know 'spose I'm kind of used to how things are."

(Educator 2, FGD1)

“Today, we went on another mini excursion back to the playground. During our time there, the children talked more about accessibility and fairness. Their conversations were thoughtful.”

Max who had not been at the playground last time, but had been in the group discussions asked Marley: “Why can’t you play on the fort?”

Marley: “I can’t get my walker up there.”

The children started to talk about how the playground could be improved.

Lewis: “It need ramps and paths that Marley can use,”

Dara: “And maybe stuff to feel for Kai.”

Emil: “Yep and stuff that makes sounds too. Like bells or crinkles. Oma can’t see good so them don’t come to the park. I think we need sounds.”

Marley: “Yeah. The park should be for everyone.”

(Teacher 2, reflective journal)

‘Liberty swing’





Harlow's drawing of the playground with the liberty swing enclosure on the right and the main playground on the left

The children wanted to make sure all their friends could play at the playground. Noticing animals needed places to rest and drink water was also beautiful, reflecting their growing awareness and empathy for all living creatures. (Educator 3, FGD3)

These moments remind me of the valuable lessons we learn during our regular activities. Whether we're playing soccer, pruning the garden, or exploring the playground, the children are always discovering, learning, and growing. Their ability to observe, question, and seek solutions is truly inspiring. (Educator 4, FGD3)

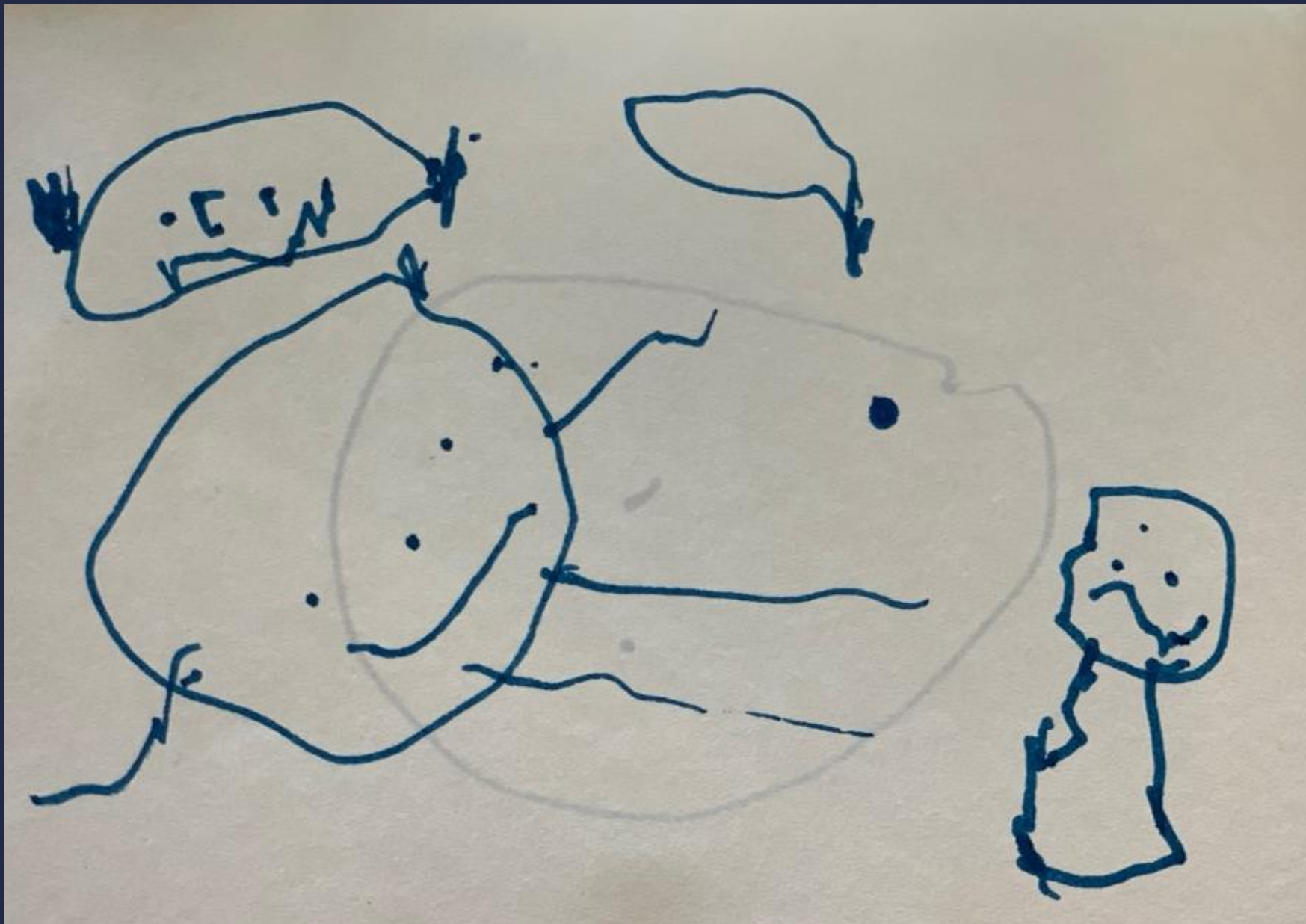
Being part of this reminded me the importance of listening to children's perspectives and supporting their efforts to create a more inclusive environment. (Teacher 2, FGD3)

Deci's painting of a
playground with
“places for
everyone”.





Min's drawing of a playground with many ramps including a ramp "up to the sky".



Noah's drawing,
depicting people of
different sizes.

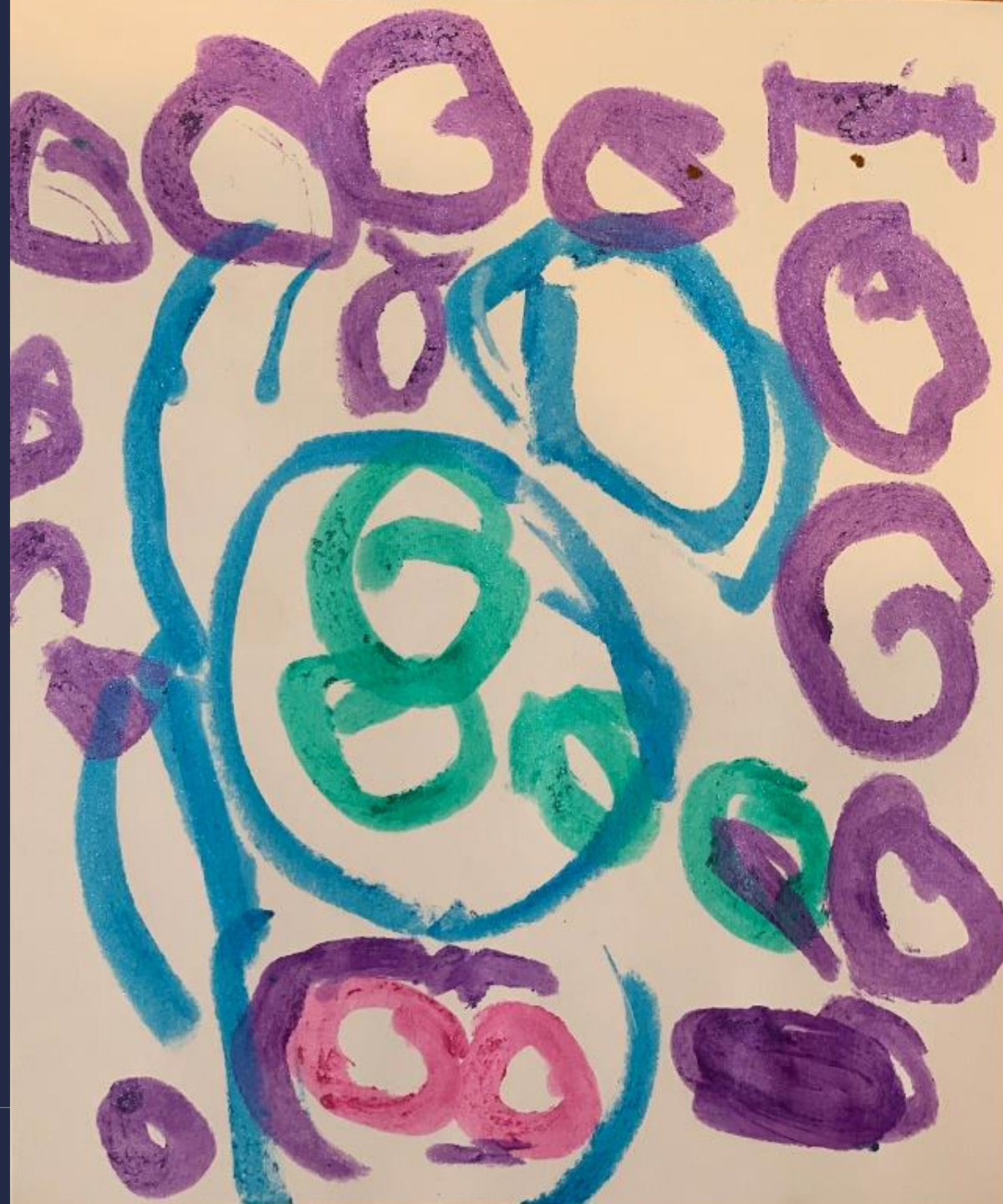
Harper's drawing of a music wall in the playground.

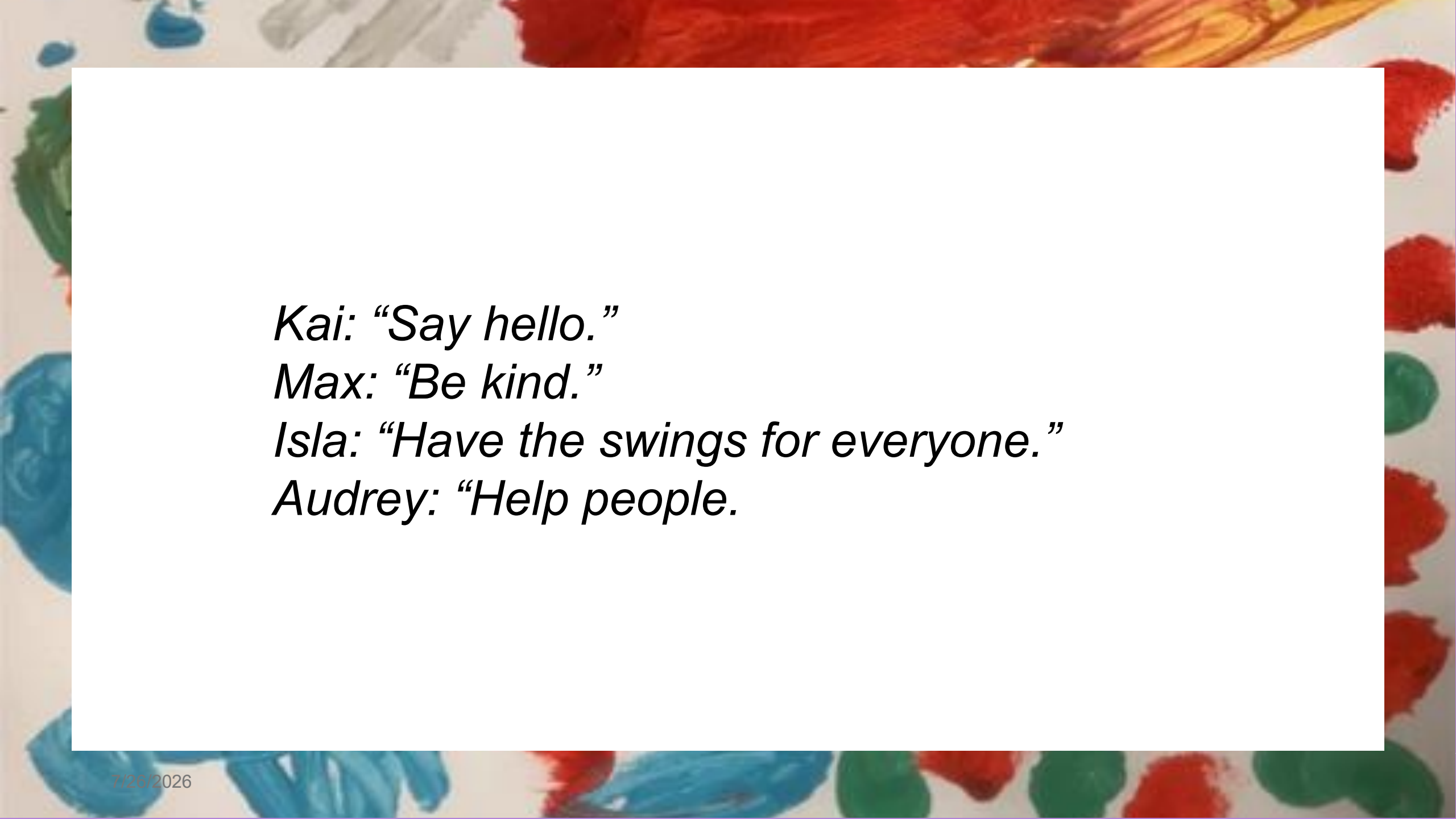




“lots of trees and flowers to make it feel like a forest” (Ashley, age 4).

Quinn's painting of "Our space. All the places for everyone".





Kai: "Say hello."

Max: "Be kind."

Isla: "Have the swings for everyone."

Audrey: "Help people."

Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence!

"The children had wonderful ideas for adding cosy spaces outdoors. We now have a comfy, shady rest area. We can still supervise, but [the children] can also have a sense of space and quiet when they want to. The children also wanted to add sounds to different places. Emil talked lots about his Oma in our playground discussions and the children really latched onto the idea that sounds can help people know where they are." (Teacher 2, FGD4)

"It was really fun. We found all sorts of stuff that makes sounds. The favourite was the beautiful [wind] chimes, but we also have lots of bells now and a wooden frog that croaks." (Educator 3, FGD4)

Audience and Influence: Children as Changemakers for Inclusion

Playgrounds are
for evryone!



Audience and Influence: **Children** influencing the review of the **Disability** **Discrimination Act**



Cologon, K. et al., (2025). *Children's perspectives on the Disability Discrimination Act: Barriers, fairness and belonging*. Submission to the Review of the Australian Disability Discrimination Act. https://cdn.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/4535673/CVC-Australian-Disability-Discrimination-Act-review-



“the big idea of this is you don’t have to change who you are to join in. Instead, we need to change the places, we need to change the rules, and we also have to change some of our attitudes.”

Finbar, age 11

**“A lot of parks don't
have things for kids
who have
wheelchairs.”**
Knox, age 11





"Disability is not a problem but the problem is the world's not currently made for all of us. Australia isn't made for everyone yet. This needs to change."
Zac, age 9



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Making Visual Art 'Visible' Beyond Sight: Inclusive Art Making with Children and Families



Ableism means:

Ableism is the assumptions, attitudes, structures and practices that position non-disabled ways of being, learning and participating as 'normal' or superior, thereby devaluing or excluding disabled children and families.

Ableism is a term increasingly used to describe the process by which people are excluded and viewed and treated as 'not one of us'. Ableism is used in the same way as 'racism' and 'sexism' to describe the process of negatively stereotyping individuals or groups on the basis of a perceived 'difference' and, often, discriminating based on such stereotypes at individual and systemic levels.

(Cologon, Mevawalla and Karaolis, 2026; Karaolis and Cologon, 2026).



Anti-ableism :

From an anti-ableist perspective, inclusion requires more than access, accommodation, or adjustments after barriers have already been encountered. It requires educators and leaders to examine the ableist assumptions embedded in everyday routines, environments, communication norms and pedagogical expectations, and to reimagine provision from the outset so that diverse ways of being, knowing, communicating and participating are recognised as valid

(Cologon, Mevawalla and Karaolis, 2026; Karaolis and Cologon, 2026).

Why anti-ableism matters

Anti-ableist pedagogy doesn't just lead us to adapting activities, it enables us to reimagine what art can be. Anti-ableist pedagogies challenge us to move beyond default practices that centre vision and verbal language and instead design environments where all children—in all of the diverse ways of doing, being, communicating and participating—can engage, express, and connect

Ponderings:

What happens when we centre inclusion, not as a goal to work toward, but as the foundation we begin from?

Why anti-ableism matters

Anti-ableist pedagogy challenges dominant views of participation that stem from the myth of the 'normal person'.



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Methodology

RESEARCH APPROACH

Portraiture is:

“as close as possible to painting with words”

(Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p.6)





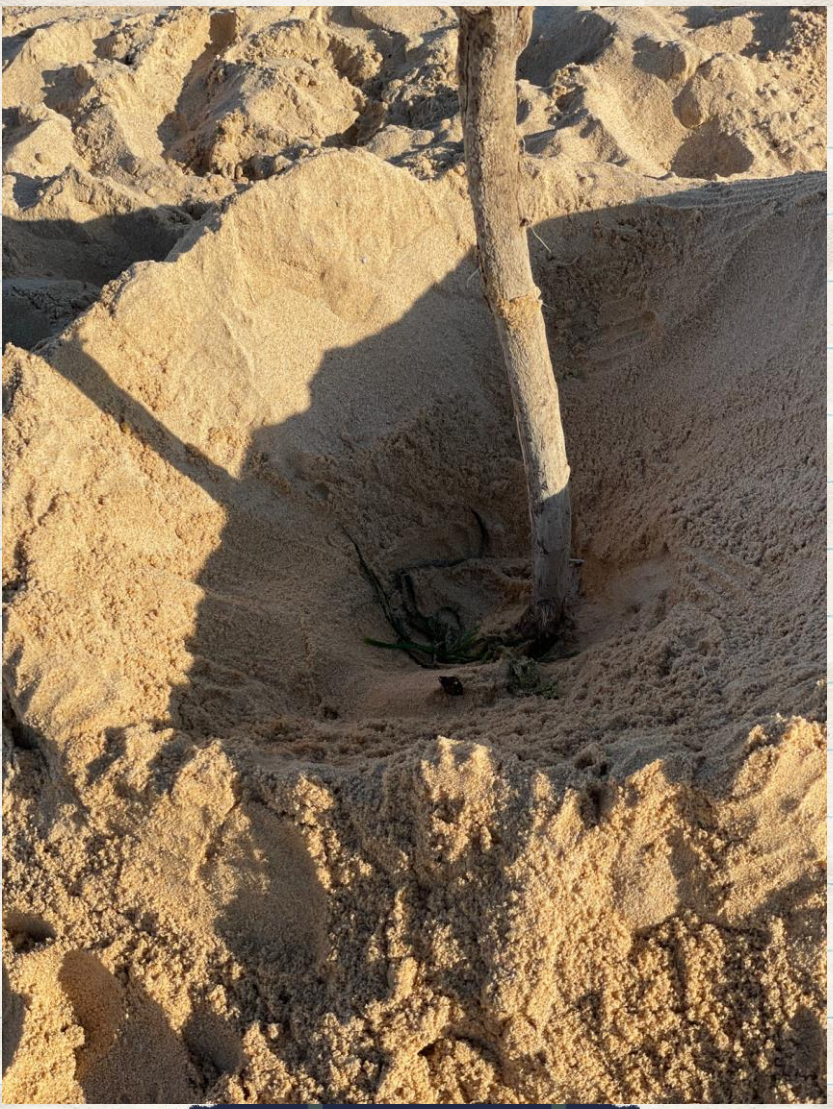




Deep Sea Dive, Samantha Ogilvie 2019



Deep Sea Dive, Samantha Ogilvie 2019





Throughout, relationships are at the core. The bonds between children and adults, friendships amongst peers, the trust between educators, parents and caregivers, and children.

This relationality creates a foundation for flourishing. The adults are listening with attention and empathy. Whether it's listening to a child's play-by-play description, or listening through touch to what a child creates.

This trust encourages children to take risks: to touch that unfamiliar sticky glue-paint, or to engage wholeheartedly with a pair of gloves on.



As educators, and advocates, our role is not just to include but to reimagine. To listen beyond words. To respond with care. And to honour every child's way of being in the world.

Ponderings:

- What are the ways that you currently create space, voice, audience and influence inclusively for children in your settings?
- What might it look like to reimagine experiences in your settings through a multi-sensory lens?
- How do you create space for children to influence the direction of your curriculum?
- Where are the places and practices in your environments that could be reshaped to welcome different ways of seeing, being, and expressing?
- What happens when we centre inclusion, not as a goal to work toward, but as the foundation we begin from?

Charles Sturt University Children's Voices centre

We'd love to keep in touch!

Email us to become a friend of CVC cvc@csu.edu.au
(newsletters, invitations to seminars, research opportunities etc.)



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Thank you

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR KATHY COLOGON

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