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Findings from research

Capturing children and young people's views on rights

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In November this year, the Open University's Children's Research Centre launched its latest report *Representing children's rights from discussion through to illustration and interpretation*. The report presents the findings of research undertaken with Children and Young People (C&YP) across nine project settings in England and Wales to capture their views and understandings about rights, and how books and visual images might represent their rights.

Thirty years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and it was opened for signature on 20th November 1989. Endorsed and ratified by the UNCRC, children's voice has become part of a dominant policy imperative as practitioners, policy makers, institutions and researchers find ways to consider children's experiences (L'Anson and Weston, 2018) which have been marginalised and in many cases silenced (Cooper, 2017; Bennett et al., 2018). The focus on voice is part of a wider dialogue about the capacity, competency and choice children have in when and how they express their views (Bucknall, 2014), how many encounter barriers to sharing their views (Cooper, 2015) as well as the multifaceted nature and complexity of children's rights (Hammersley, 2015; Montgomery, 2018).

'The focus on voice is part of a wider dialogue about the capacity, competency and choice children have in when and how they express their views (Bucknall, 2014)'

As the Convention reflects on its thirtieth anniversary, this call for debate and discussion on children's rights is timely. In response and a guiding principle for the design of this study was the recognition of rights as something that cannot be precisely categorised or easily granted, but are fluid, complex, and socially constructed. Consequently, this research employed a multimodal research design, utilising focus-group interviews, young researcher projects, role-play and drama, and photo-elicitation as the means to engage with and listen to diverse groups of C&YP. The aim was to use the multimodal activities as a stimulus for conversation and to provide opportunities for the C&YP to contribute to a shared narrative about rights within the context of their own lives.

Over the Autumn and Spring of 2018/19, the Children's Research Centre commenced an initial phase of research with C&YP in England and Wales. Across the nine project settings, the findings illustrate the intertwined relationships across the various articles of the UNCRC (as envisioned by its original authors). The C&YP people in this study understood their rights as active entitlement that changes over time and according to age and context. Their conversations and activities reveal the evolving nature of their understanding of the concepts of rights, even though they may not always recognise their own individual rights as embodied in the UNCRC.

C&YP highlighted a relationship between rights, reflected through their prioritisation of rights; for example, some C&YP prioritised their rights to have friends and to learn over their right to privacy, while others prioritised the right to shelter over the right to education. The research highlights the ongoing debate that rights are context-specific: as one child emphasised, 'What's important to me might be different to what's important to someone else ... to someone who's getting beaten up, safety is the most important thing.' The C&YP liked images that promote friendship and provide positive role models of disability, as well as images that represent them and enable them to identify themselves and their families. They are attracted to and responsive to visual images related to rights that promise change, possibility and potential empowerment, in contrast to their reactions to images of segregation or rights denied. For some of the older C&YP in this research, images of rights not being respected are more powerful.

A key outcome of working in this way is a commitment by the Children's Research Centre for ongoing dialogue and consultation with C&YP, an approach that we will continue to foster through all the organisations we work with.

For the [full report](#):

Chamberlain, L., Afroze, J., Cooper, V. & Collins, T. (2019) Representing children's rights from discussion through to illustration and interpretation, Milton Keynes, The Open University Children's Research Centre.

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