

Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Research Findings: Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to express their views on all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight. This right applies in the context of research; however, examples of young children being engaged as co-researchers remain rare. *Practice or Policy:* This article examines the implications of adopting an explicit UNCRC-informed approach to engaging children as co-researchers. It draws on a research project that sought to ascertain young children's views on after-school programs and that involved a university-based research team working along with 2 groups of co-researchers; each composed of 4 children aged 4 to 5. The article discusses the contribution made by children to the development of the research questions and choice of methods and their involvement in the interpretation of the data and dissemination of the findings. It suggests that, although there are limits to what young children can and will want to do in the context of adult-led research studies, an explicit UNCRC-informed approach requires the adoption of supportive strategies that can assist children to engage in a meaningful way, with consequent benefits for the research findings and outputs.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) applies to every child younger than age 18, without discrimination. However, the term *child* undoubtedly “masks a wide range of categories of children” (Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 90), and it is clear that some

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vulnerable groups are not given specific attention in the current formulation of the UNCRC (Freeman, 2000). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (hereafter, “the Committee”) has expressed concern at the lack of attention given to early childhood. It has produced a General Comment, “Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood,” in which it has made clear that *all* children, including the very youngest children, are holders of all rights enshrined in the UNCRC and as such should be “recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view” (United Nations [UN], 2005, para. 5).

The Committee has thus recognized a distinct category of children as those who are in their “early years” and defined this period to include those “at birth and throughout infancy; during the pre-school year; as well as during the transition to school” (UN, 2005, para. 1). Given the variation in the latter events in different cultural contexts, it has suggested a working definition that extends to all children younger than age 8 (UN, 2005, para. 4). Because all of the rights in the UNCRC apply universally, children in their early years of life enjoy a comprehensive set of rights covering almost all areas of their lives, including education, play, privacy, health, and health care as well as an adequate standard of living and protection from all forms of abuse, neglect, and violence. In establishing these rights, the UNCRC clearly positions children, including young children, as rights holders and places a corresponding duty on ratifying states to respect, protect, and fulfill the extensive obligations contained therein.

Children of this age, like older children, also enjoy the right to express their views freely and to have those views be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, a right established in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007). The significance of Article 12 is such that it has been elevated to the status of a general principle alongside the right to non-discrimination (Article 2); the best interests principle (Article 3); and the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6; UN, 1991). Moreover, a General Comment elaborating on the nature and content of Article 12 was adopted by the Committee in 2009 (UN, 2009). Freeman (1996, p. 37) has observed that Article 12 is significant “not only for what it says, but because it recognises the child as a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society.” It was partly as a result of this that Article 12 became one of the most controversial provisions of the UNCRC during the drafting process: For example, its perceived potential to undermine adult authority was a key reason why the United States did not ratify the Convention (Kilbourne, 1998). Moreover, its implementation in practice, particularly in relation to younger children, has been problematic not least because children’s enjoyment of Article 12 is dependent on

the cooperation of adults, who may not be committed to it or who may have a vested interest in not complying with it (Lundy, 2007) or who simply may not be used to recognizing children, especially younger children, as competent meaning-makers in their own lives (UN, 2005). The Committee has further asserted that achieving meaningful opportunities for the implementation of Article 12 requires a preparedness to challenge assumptions about children's capacities and to encourage the development of environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities (UN, 2009, para. 135).

Notwithstanding the challenges in implementation, it is clear that children's right to have their views be given due weight extends "to all matters affecting the child" and thus necessarily applies in the context of research projects relating to children, a position underscored by the Committee in its assertion that the right to express views should be "anchored in the child's daily life...including through *research and consultation*" (UN, 2009, para. 14; emphasis added). The significance of the UNCRC has been acknowledged frequently by childhood researchers as a key driver in the trend toward the active participation of children in research studies (Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004; McKechnie & Hobbs, 2004; Powell & Smith, 2009; Thomson & Gunter, 2006). Moreover, the use of methods that engage directly with children as research subjects and that are respectful of children's competencies has become a distinctive feature of early childhood research. Young children have increasingly become involved in research projects as participants through the use of age-appropriate methods, including, for example, cameras, drawing, tours, map making, and ranking exercises (Clark, 2010; Clark & Moss, 2001; Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Dockett, Einarsodottir, & Perry, 2009). In childhood research more generally, there has been a trend toward involving children in research not just as *research participants* but also as *peer* or *co-researchers* throughout all stages of the research process, including designing of the research questions (Kellett et al., 2004), data collection (O'Brien & Moules, 2007), analysis and reporting (Coad & Evans, 2008), and dissemination (Tisdall, 2008). Increasingly, it is accepted that this involvement in the design and delivery of research projects is essential if children's rights and best interests are to be duly respected (Alderson, 2008) and indeed is arguably a necessary and logical consequence of adopting a UNCRC-informed approach to research (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). Nonetheless, this move toward the direct engagement of children in shaping research processes—not just as subjects—has undoubtedly been skewed toward the involvement of older children. Thus, instances in which children younger than age 8 are involved directly in research design, interpretation, and dissemination remain rare.

This article seeks to contribute to methodological discussion about the involvement of young children in research by examining the implications

of adopting an explicit UNCRC-informed approach to engaging children as co-researchers. It draws on our experience in a research project that sought to ascertain young children’s views on after-school programs and discusses the ways in which a university-based research team worked along with two groups of co-researchers, each composed of four children aged 4 to 5. Throughout the research process the team attempted to ensure that children’s engagement was compliant with Article 12 and informed by an existing rights-based model to children’s participation (Lundy, 2007). This model (see Figure 1), which provides a legally sound but user-friendly approach to Article 12, as understood in relation to other key UNCRC provisions, identifies four key concepts underpinning successful implementation of participation rights in the UNCRC: (a) *space*—children must be given the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive, (b) *voice*—children must be facilitated to express their views, (c) *audience*—the view must be listened to, and (d) *influence*—the view must be acted upon as appropriate.

This article discusses the ways in which we, drawing on the model in Figure 1, implemented a rights-based approach to the engagement of children as co-researchers across the research process. It reflects on the strategies used with the children to build their capacity for engagement from the outset, the subsequent contribution made by the children to the development of the research questions and choice of methods, and the children’s

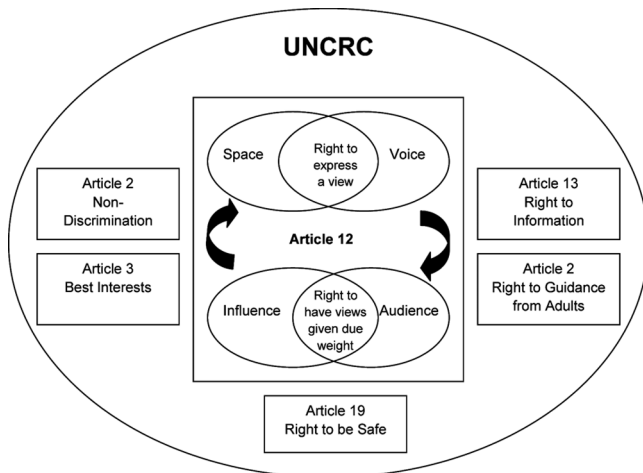


FIGURE 1 Conceptualizing Article 12. UNCRC = United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

involvement in the interpretation of the data and dissemination of the findings to the research funders. It concludes with some critical reflections about the extent to which young children can be involved meaningfully as co-researchers and the role of the adult researcher in these situations. It suggests that although there are limits to what young children can and will want to do in the context of adult-led research studies, an explicit UNCRC-informed approach requires the adoption of supportive strategies that can assist children to engage in a meaningful way, with consequent benefits for the research findings and outputs.

THE PROJECT

The research team was commissioned by Barnardo's Northern Ireland, a leading children's charity, to undertake a research project as part of their ongoing strategy to promote educational attainment and positive engagement with school for children from socially disadvantaged areas. The project built upon earlier work that was commissioned by Barnardo's Northern Ireland to inform the selection of outcomes for a proposed educational intervention (see Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). As part of the service design process for their Ready to Learn Programme, the overall purpose of the current research was to engage directly with Year One primary school children (aged 4–5 years) to inform the development of an out-of-school hours program for young children living in disadvantaged communities. Two primary schools were selected purposively to take part in the study. These schools were chosen for their location in recognized socially disadvantaged areas and the fact that they reflected the two main religious and community backgrounds in Northern Ireland. Both Barnardo's and the research team were committed to working in a manner consistent with international children's rights standards, applying a UNCRC-informed approach to the project. As noted, one implication of this is to engage young children not just as research participants but also as co-researchers from the outset of the project.

When an explicit UNCRC-informed approach is applied to research, involving children as co-researchers, irrespective of age, takes on added significance and becomes, at the very least, a matter of principle. Enabling children to express their views and giving due weight to those views *in all matters affecting them* as prescribed by Article 12 of the UNCRC is not restricted to the act of involving children as research subjects but extends to the research *process*. How research is conducted and what methods are used clearly impact on children who are involved as research participants, as well as children more generally with respect to research outcomes. As

co-researchers, young children have a key role to play in identifying questions, identifying ways in which their peers can participate effectively in research projects as participants, and helping to give meaning to the findings. Indeed, the Committee has commented that decision makers should “carefully listen to children’s views wherever their perspective can enhance the quality of solutions” (UN, 2009, para. 27).

The research team established two Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009), one in each school. Members of the CRAGs were invited to participate in the project in their capacity as co-researchers and as a key stakeholder group with particular expertise on the issues under consideration. The research team had initially intended that each CRAG would comprise six Year One children. However, given the age of the children and the fact that six would have constituted a relatively large proportion of a small class size, it was decided that four would be a more appropriate CRAG size for this study. Each CRAG therefore comprised four Year One children (aged 4–5)—two boys and two girls—and included children from diverse ethnic groups. In contrast to previous research projects in which the CRAG comprised older children (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009), the children in this study were for the most part unable to read and write and had very basic numeracy skills. To that end strategies used with the children had to be primarily visual and/or kinesthetic.

Article 12 of the UNCRC also requires that children be able to express their views *freely*. In this context, a key element of this is ensuring that children are able to express their views without pressure and can choose whether to express their views. Article 12 is thus a *choice* for the child, not an *obligation* (UN, 2009, para. 16). The research team ensured that all meetings of the CRAGs were structured in ways that reflected the wishes of individuals and the group, that all children could engage actively and meaningfully with the issues, and that meetings were inclusive and held in a “safe” and appropriate place where children were able to express their views freely (Lundy, 2007). Conducting research with young children in a familiar environment is obviously important in terms of their feelings of security (Langston, Abbott, Lewis, & Kellett, 2004). However, holding research meetings in their familiar *school* environment can be problematic because children may consider the activities to be class work. This can be addressed in part by keeping the engagement as informal as possible and by using the least conventional or school-like spaces available (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). Therefore, in one school CRAG meetings were held in the school’s Year One resource area, whereas in the other CRAG meetings were held in the school library. Both were locations in which the children felt at ease and with which they were familiar but were distinct from their normal classroom environment. In line with normal ethical approaches used in conducting

research with children, the team also emphasized continually to CRAG members that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the process at any time (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Davis, 1998; Hill, 2005).

BUILDING CHILDREN'S CAPACITY FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISSUES

A key obstacle to involving young children in research as co-researchers is the assumption that young children in particular lack the capacity or maturity to express their views or lack the ability to participate in the research process in a meaningful way (Christensen & Prout, 2002). However, in accordance with an explicit UNCRC-informed approach, it is not for the child to prove his or her capacity to do so but for the researcher to "presume that the child has the capacity to form his or her own views" (UN, 2009, para. 20). Moreover, Article 12 of the UNCRC necessitates that children not only be given opportunities to *express* their views but also be assisted in *forming* their views (Lundy, 2007). In so declaring, the Committee has stated that

it is not necessary that the child has complete knowledge of all aspects of the matter affecting her or him, but that she or he has sufficient understanding to be capable of appropriately forming her or his own views on the matter. (UN, 2009, para. 21)

A child's capacity to form a view is not simply characterized by his or her biological age but can be influenced by information provided, as well as experiences, environment, social and cultural expectations, and levels of support (UN, 2009, para. 29). Article 12 must therefore also be read in light of Article 13, that is, the right of all children to seek, receive, and impart information. Indeed, the "right to information is essential, because it is the precondition of the child's clarified decisions" (UN, 2009, para. 25).

These key elements provide a clear rationale for capacity building with children. Although the literature on children's role as co-researchers has highlighted the need to develop children's capacities (albeit largely in the context of older children; see, e.g., Kellett et al., 2004), this has focused primarily on the need to build children's capacities and provide information with respect to research methodologies and with a view to preparing children for participation in the data collection process rather than capacity building on the substantive issues underpinning the research. Given that the role of the CRAGs in this study was to advise on the research process as

opposed to collecting data, initial meetings with the CRAGs included a series of capacity-building activities designed to familiarize the children with the issues surrounding the project, to develop their views on the issues, and to assist them in applying their ideas to situations beyond their own experiences (see Lundy & McEvoy, 2009, in press-b). Activities were designed to be both creative and engaging, taking into consideration the range of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication through which very young children often demonstrate their understanding and views (UN, 2009, para. 21). Thus, visual and kinesthetic approaches were emphasized, approaches recognized as preferable for engaging very young children (Clark, 2010).

The first capacity-building exercise was designed to introduce the children to the broader concepts in which the research study was situated: the nature of education and the purpose of schooling. The CRAGs were asked to suggest “reasons why children go school”; prompt questions such as “What do children learn in school?” and “Why do children *have* to go to school?” were also used in the ensuing discussion. To facilitate this and to support children in forming and expressing their views, the research team used laminated images as prompts. These laminated images were deliberately chosen to reflect a number of traditional theoretical positions on the purposes of education: from functionalist perspectives on the role of education in socialization and the transmission of societal norms (Durkheim, 1956) to liberal perspectives on education’s role in developing the unique potential of each individual (Dewey, 1953). As such, the following types of images were used to stimulate discussion and thinking among the children on the issues surrounding the project: images of children playing together and sharing, children learning new skills, a range of jobs children might do when they grow up, and so on. It was clear that the children had grasped the key concepts being discussed in that they articulated quite clearly their perspectives on the purpose of education, commenting that it was “important to go to school” so that they could “learn to share” and “learn new things” such as “reading, writing, and numbers” and that this would help them “do other things.”

Having established the broad conceptual location of the research study, the research team focused attention on issues relating to the research questions set by the funders: what helps children settle in to Year One, what children like about Year One, and what children find hard about Year One. In the second capacity-building exercise, the children were again shown images to discuss examples of the types of things that would help children “settle in to Year One.” In this case images of key people in children’s lives were used, including parents/family, teacher, classroom assistant, and friends. The children were asked to make suggestions of how these people might help

children settle. These suggestions were recorded by the adult researchers on colored sticky notes and attached to the image. The images prompted considerable discussion, with the children identifying a number of important home-based and school-based factors that contributed to settling in to school. For example, they suggested that families could help children settle in school by “helping you get dressed for school” and “promis[ing] to come back”; teachers “help with writing and drawing” and by talking “in kind voices”; classroom assistants help “with things you cannot do”; and friends “stand up for each other” and “help you up if you fall.”

The third capacity-building activity required the CRAGs to consider aspects of Year One school life that children might like or find difficult. To facilitate this, the research team developed a card-sorting exercise, a method commonly used in participatory research (see, e.g., O’Kane, 2000). Image cards of a range of activities and aspects of school life were produced and the CRAGs were asked to decide whether each image should be placed in an “all children would like” pile, an “all children would find hard” pile, or a “*some* children might like and *some* children might find hard” pile. Each pile was represented by a hoop, with “some children might like and some children might find hard” represented in the space between the hoops. This was followed by further discussion in which children ranked the images and also provided other suggestions of activities children enjoyed or found difficult in Year One. This activity not only provided the CRAGs with further insight into the nature of the research study but also, as discussed later, provided a number of items to be explored with the research participants.

During this activity, as in the others, the CRAGs were asked to reflect on the experiences of Year One children *in general* rather than on individual experiences, a task that posed particular challenges. It was apparent that the children were categorizing the image cards on the basis of their own personal preferences. This is understandable. Children, especially very young children, can find it difficult to think beyond their own immediate views and experience, and thus steps need to be taken by adult researchers to assist child co-researchers to consider the issues under investigation from a more *general* perspective (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). In this particular case a number of strategies were used to help the children see beyond their own experience. Prompt questions were framed carefully from the outset to focus attention on children *in general*. For example, the CRAGs were asked, “How do you think families can help children settle in school?” rather than “How did your family help you settle?” When it became apparent that the children were relating their own experiences, further prompt questions were used: “Do you think everyone in this group would say that?” “What about everyone in your class?” “What about children in a different school?” This

form of questioning provided what could be described as a gradient from subjective experience toward more objective engagement with the issues and to an extent helped the children to *begin* to develop the ability to think outside their own immediate circumstances.

Thus, taken together, these capacity-building activities enabled the children to gain a wider perspective not only of the major issues in the project but also of their role in helping the research team ascertain the views of different children other than themselves.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

During the first meeting, the CRAGs were introduced to the idea of “research.” Understandably, the children were unfamiliar with the word. However, they all understood the idea of “a search,” and this was used to explain that we were searching for the answers to two questions: “What do Year Ones find hard at school?” and “How could an after-school club help them with these things they find hard?” It was explained that these were the questions commissioned by Barnardo’s and thus bound the project. In an ideal children’s rights-based approach, the children would have been involved in the discussion before the questions were set (Lundy & McEvoy, in press-a; see also Kellett et al., 2004). However, research questions are often predetermined for adult researchers as well, particularly when it involves a project commissioned by an external agency. That said, there was obviously scope for the research team to develop the sub-questions that would be used to answer them, and this provided an opening for the CRAGs to influence the way in which these questions were addressed to the participants.

As discussed previously, in the initial meeting the CRAGs had been asked to consider what children liked about school and what they found hard about school. The most common suggestions were then used to develop a picture survey containing 12 images of a range of school-related activities and themes for use with the research participants, who would be asked to place stickers on those images of aspects of school they enjoyed and to place an X on the images of those they found difficult. Thus, because the images used for this activity were selected in light of discussion with the CRAGs, drawing on examples of things the CRAGs thought children might enjoy or find hard about school, the CRAGs were having a direct influence on the questions and focus of the research, thus foregrounding the children’s views and giving the CRAGs direct input into choosing the main items in the research instrument.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN DECISIONS ABOUT METHODS

Having developed an understanding of the wider issues, the research team sought to ascertain from the CRAGs the best way(s) of finding out from Year One children, in this instance their classmates, what they enjoyed and found difficult about school and what they would like more help with after school in an after-school program. The adult researchers had experience working with children of this age in other projects and had a range of ideas as to the methods that might be appropriate. In addition to the picture survey described previously, we had planned to draw on approaches used in the “mosaic approach” to form a “living picture” of children’s lives in the context of readiness to learn by using a combination of picture prompts, photography, school tours, and verbal forms of expression (Clark, 2010; Clark & Moss, 2001). The methods we intended to use were explained to the children, and they were asked to comment on these or to suggest other ways in which we could encourage their classmates to share their views and experiences.

One CRAG suggested that *circle time*—a daily school activity in which children sit in a circle and take turns to talk (Mosley, 1996; Pascal & Bertram, 2009)—would be a useful mechanism for exploring other children’s views. They explained in particular its primary benefit: that it provided an opportunity for everyone who wanted to speak to do so in a supportive “listening” environment. The suggestion, which had not been on the adult researchers’ list of possible methods in advance of the discussion with the CRAG, had much to recommend it in practice. In particular, it not only allowed every child who wanted to say something to speak when they were holding the “talking object” (in the case of these schools a soft toy) for as long as they liked without interruption from others, but it also allowed every child who did *not* want to say something the chance to pass the toy on without feeling uncomfortable. Thus, the children’s preferred method counteracted some of the recognized disadvantages of group interviews, such as problems in recording when people speak at once and the fact that some voices get heard more than others (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007).

In particular, the CRAGs were asked to comment on our decision to use child-friendly digital cameras in exploring what children liked and found hard about school. Cameras are used widely as a tool through which children, especially young children, can express their views (Clark, 2004, 2010; Cook & Hess, 2007; O’Kane, 2000; Punch, 2002). The children in the CRAGs were familiar with the type of cameras we had chosen and were very enthusiastic about their use as a mechanism for investigating children’s perspectives on their experience of Year One. Consulting the CRAGs about

this served to confirm that this was an appropriate method with which to engage the children who would be the research participants. Moreover, the CRAGs were able to demonstrate to their classmates how to use the cameras, including tasks such as focusing and deleting unwanted images, when the data collection stage of the research commenced.

An interesting issue arose in relation to who participated in the camera-based activity. The CRAGs were keen not to be left out of what seemed to them to be a fun activity on the day the research was carried out. They also wondered about the children who were not taking part in the research because their parents had not returned the consent forms. We decided to allow all children to participate in this activity but explained to the CRAG children that we could not use their pictures as data (as they were part of the research team), nor could we use the pictures taken by the small number of children whose parents had not allowed them to participate. In discussion with the CRAGs, we devised a way of differentiating the cameras into three groups by the use of a removable and reversible design panel supplied for decorating the front of the camera. Thus, one design was used for the CRAGs, another design was used for the participants, and the children who did not have permission to take part had no design plate at all. Images from the latter cameras were deleted without inspection when the activity was over. In this way and following up on the CRAGs' concerns about some children (including themselves) feeling "left out," we were able to adapt the activity to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to engage in the activity but that the participants' data were able to be distinguished for analysis.

Christensen and James (2000) have suggested that researchers need to adopt practices that are not different from adult methods per se but that resonate with children's own concerns and routines. The best way of ascertaining what the latter are is undoubtedly to ask children themselves. On the advice of the CRAGs, we were able to work in ways that the children understood, were comfortable with, and enjoyed and to do so in a manner that facilitated children who wanted to opt out of the research in doing so and yet ensured that no child in the class felt excluded. Although adult researchers will have significant experience in ensuring all of these issues, working with children as co-researchers in situ helps to ensure that these issues are addressed appropriately from children's perspectives.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN INTERPRETATION

Directly involving children in the process of data interpretation as co-researchers is crucial to ensuring that findings are grounded in the

perspectives and experiences of children themselves as opposed to reflecting adult interpretations of children's perspectives (Dockett et al., 2009). This not only adds to the credibility of the research findings (Fraser, 2004) but can also produce more nuanced understandings of the issues under investigation (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). Moreover, it is apparent that, from a rights perspective, this crucial stage during which the findings are attributed meaning by the research team is a key matter affecting children and therefore one on which they are entitled to have their views given due weight under Article 12. In spite of this, examples of children being involved in analyzing or interpreting research data continue to be scarce (see Coad & Evans, 2008), and scarcer still where the children are younger than age 8. The lack of engagement with young children in this context obviously stems from assumptions made about their capacity to cope with the process of analysis and interpretation. We would suggest that researchers' assumptions may be right but that what needs to change may be the process itself and, in particular, the way in which information is presented to children.

In this project, the children in the CRAGs were first asked to consider the results of the *picture survey*. Because the children would not have been able to comprehend data presented numerically, the findings were presented visually. Cards representing the actual number of research participants were used to indicate how they had responded to particular activities or aspects of school life: numbers who liked the activity or found it hard. These cards were coded for gender using images of either a boy or girl, which enabled the children to see responses according to gender. This enabled the children to easily identify how the participants had responded in general and also any gender differences. For example, Figure 2 shows how the data were presented for



FIGURE 2 Demonstrating the results of the picture survey to the Children's Research Advisory Groups: The example used here is school bags. (Color figure available online.)

interpretation in relation to the children's responses to the issue of "school bags" in the picture survey: Five children (3 girls and 2 boys) identified school bags as one of the hard things about starting school, and 14 children (7 boys and 7 girls) found school bags something they liked. The CRAG children discussed the findings and provided insight into why other children might have responded in this way. Some members of the CRAGs suggested that children found school bags hard because they found it hard to pack their bags and in particular to remember to bring everything they needed. It was also suggested that school bags were heavy to carry. Furthermore, they explained the finding that most children like having a school bag in terms of how school bags provided children with an opportunity to express their own individuality: "you get to choose your favorite character" on a school bag. In sum, although the picture survey highlighted *what* children liked or found difficult, it did not always tell us *why* this was the case. The CRAGs were able to provide expert perspectives that enabled us to gain insight and understanding into the reasons underlying the responses.

Next the CRAGs were asked to interpret findings from the *camera activity*. They were provided with examples of the images recorded by the children from each broad category (what they liked and found hard about school). The discussion focused primarily on commonly identified issues and, in particular, on why children might find certain activities or experiences difficult in school. For example, many children had identified "letters and sounds" as a difficult activity. The CRAGs suggested that this might be "because they think it's boring or hard." Images of "outside areas" had also been taken by a number of children. The CRAGs discussed how outside might be hard for other children because it was somewhere "they might fall



FIGURE 3 Child's image of fruit and a milk carton in the rubbish bin—"like" category. (Color figure available online.)

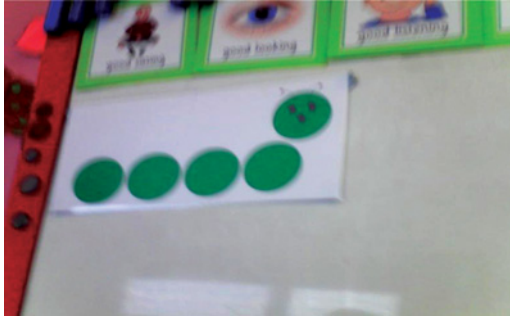


FIGURE 4 Child's image of the “green dots” caterpillar—“like” category. (Color figure available online.)

and hurt themselves” and that “people might push you, like Year 6s, Year 7s, and even Year 3s.” Some children had indicated that they found the dinner hall hard. The CRAGs suggested this might be because “maybe their dinner hall is really noisy and it hurts their ears.” Similarly, some children had taken photographs of a “no running” sign. The CRAGs suggested that they might find this hard because they wanted to run or it might be because “it’s hard to remember the rules sometimes.”

Although efforts were made to record the child participants’ reasons for taking particular photographs during the camera activity, the enthusiasm of the Year One children for taking photographs meant that some of the reasons were not recorded. When it was not clear why a particular image had been recorded, the research team asked the CRAGs for clarification. For example, one child had taken a photograph of a rubbish bin as something she liked about school (see Figure 3). However, the CRAGs were able to clarify that the focal point of the picture was the milk carton and fruit from “snack time” in the bin. Another child had taken a picture of what, to the researchers, appeared to be green dots, but it emerged that this was in fact a picture of a caterpillar used in the classroom to assist children with syllables (see Figure 4).

As anticipated, discussing the findings with the CRAGs provided the research team with a more nuanced understanding of why children liked particular activities or found others hard than would otherwise have been the case, and in other instances it provided invaluable clarification of why children had chosen to record particular images.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN DISSEMINATION

As Jones (2004, p. 128) noted, “The findings of all studies raise implications for a range of audiences and methods for dissemination should be tailored

accordingly.” In this study, the primary output for dissemination was a written report requested by Barnardo’s as part of the original commission. This was clearly the responsibility of the adult researchers. However, in line with the UNCRC-informed approach adopted throughout the research, we discussed ways in which the *children* involved in the study could contribute directly to this report and further dissemination of the findings. Given that most children in Year One are not able to write and that some may not be comfortable or able to express their views through drawing (Coates, 2004; Greig et al., 2007), the research team, in consultation with the CRAGs, employed the services of a professional artist to enable all of the children, including but not restricted to those in the CRAGs, to express their final recommendations about what they would like to see in an after-school club. The focus of this activity was therefore on what an “ideal” after-school program would look like. The artist worked with the children in each school to produce a large collage reflecting the children’s ideas about the ideal after-school service, including *who* should be at such a service, what *activities* should take place, and what the *environment* would be like on the outside and inside. Figures 5 and 6 show examples of the work that was carried out in one school.

The children offered their ideas and the artist drew them, adapting the images as the children developed their suggestions. The children were also



FIGURE 5 Artwork activity—the type of person who should work in an after-school club: someone like a “granny” with a “nice smile and nice eyes” and who is “good at art” and “dancing” and “can cut hair.” (Color figure available online.)



FIGURE 6 Artwork—the types of activities children wanted to do in an after-school club. (Color figure available online.)

able to draw pictures anywhere on the canvas, if they chose to do so, which many did. Others chose to color in some of the artist's images, thus emphasizing one of the key findings in the study—that children wanted the after-school environment to be bright and colorful. Boxes containing samples of the children's photographs from the camera activity were also available, and children were invited to stick images of activities that they thought would be useful to do in an after-school program along the perimeter of the canvas. The end result was a collage of recommendations that were scanned and integrated into the written findings in the final report to Barnardo's. A final composite piece of artwork was produced from the digital scans, which notably comprised the artist's images reduced in size as a background to the children's own contributions, which were emphasized through digital magnification. In this way, the CRAGs, as well as all the child participants, had direct input into the final report to Barnardo's, and their perspectives were placed at the fore in the dissemination process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The major challenge of any UNCRC-informed approach to children's participation is ensuring that children's views are taken seriously, a difficulty that has been identified as the "holy grail" of children's participation more generally (Sinclair, 2004). We would suggest that this challenge is accentuated when the attempt to ensure meaningful participation is taking

place in the context of adult-driven research processes (which usually involve a significant degree of professional, technical skills) and when the children involved are very young (as they will be in the context of early childhood research). In such instances, the imbalance in the experience and skills of the child and the adult researchers is undoubtedly stark. It would be naive to suggest that this is a relationship either characterized by or with the potential for equality in terms of resources, knowledge, skill, and power. That said, the obligation under the UNCRC remains the same: to enable the child the opportunity to express his or her views freely and then to give the child's views "due weight."

As discussed, enabling children to express their views freely can be achieved when deliberate attempts are made to support children in the formation and expression of their views so that they can participate confidently. When this is achieved, young children can contribute very effectively to many aspects of research processes, including the focus of research questions, choice of methods, interpretation of data, and outputs. However, in our experience, what it is possible to do with young researchers between 4 and 5 years of age is not the same as what can be achieved with older children or adults. The reality remains that young children's level of engagement with and contribution to research processes is impacted inevitably by their limited literacy and numeracy skills as well as the fact that many children of that age find it difficult to think beyond their own immediate experience. Moreover, sometimes young children find it difficult to focus on the issue, and their contributions can be inappropriate or lack relevance. When that happens, the onus is on adult researchers to listen respectfully and acknowledge the view expressed in line with the first part of the obligation in Article 12 of the UNCRC but to give those views due weight in line with the second.

We would suggest that this approach is in itself respectful of children's rights: Article 12 acknowledges that the child's right to have his or her views given due weight is contingent upon "age and maturity," a contentious but arguably pragmatic qualification on the right that stems from the recognition that not all children will have sufficient understanding and experience to have their views taken into account in all situations affecting them. The younger the child and the more complex the issue, the more likely this is to be the case. Moreover, Article 12 is only one provision in the UNCRC and must be balanced against others, including the child's right in Article 3 to have his or her best interests taken into account as a primary consideration in all decisions affecting him or her. So, for instance, it can be argued that it is not in any child's best interests to have a suggestion for a research question or method or interpretation accepted if the effect of that is to undermine the validity or reliability of the data and thus jeopardize the credibility of the research. Finally, the right in Article 12 is operationalized

in accordance with the adult's obligation in Article 5 to give children support and guidance in the exercise of their other rights. In the light of this, the Committee has observed that "the child has a right to direction and guidance, which have to compensate for the lack of knowledge, experience and understanding of the child and are restricted by his or her evolving capacities" (UN, 2009, para. 84).

In the context of children's engagement in research processes, a UNCRC-informed approach requires the researcher to listen to the child's views with respect always but to give them due weight arguably only when the outcome of that will ultimately improve "the quality of solutions" (UN, 2009, para. 27). To do otherwise is not the child's unqualified right, nor is it in the child's best interests, and this should be explained to the child in the context of the ongoing dialogue between the adult and child researchers.

The fact that children's views—whatever their age or maturity—are to be treated seriously but are not necessarily to prevail on every issue is clear from the Committee's General Comment No. 12, which looks specifically at the ways in which Article 12 should be implemented. It is somewhat unfortunate that the limits that might be placed on children's views in the process of giving them due weight are less clear in its General Comment on children in the early years. It could be argued that in General Comment No. 7 the Committee has a tendency to overemphasize children's potential contributions to the decisions affecting them at the expense of acknowledging the limitations. Although it is understandable why the Committee would feel the need to emphasize capacity, agency, and competence in its guidance on the early years, because recognition of competence and ensuing autonomy rights are more likely to be denied to this particular group of children than others, there is limited recognition of the fact that children will not always be able to express a reasonable, informed view on every issue that affects them. Young children are neither incompetent nor fully competent in many situations, including research studies, and they will benefit from (and in fact are *entitled* to) adult guidance. In contrast, in its General Comment on Article 12, the Committee pays more heed to the limitations on the actual operation of participation rights in the UNCRC. So, for example, *maturity* is defined as the capacity of the child to express his or her views in a "reasonable and independent manner" (UN, 2009, para. 30). These are qualities that many young children will have in relation to particular aspects of research processes, but in our experience it will not always be the case that children, especially young children, will be able to do this in every aspect of a research study. The role of the researcher in such instances is to deploy his or her own professional judgment and give those views due weight.

Much of the literature on research *with* children discusses the potential power imbalance between adults and children in research processes

(Alderson, 2008; Kirby, 2002). Adopting a rights-based approach provides a means of addressing this power differential, as an immediate consequence of the recognition of the child as a rights holder is that taking his or her views seriously becomes the entitlement of the child rather than the gift of the adult (Lundy, 2007). Nonetheless, if children's best interests are to be served, there must be appropriate recognition of the experience and expertise of those who are professionally trained. As in other cases in which decisions are made with and for children (e.g., by teachers, doctors, or social workers), the obligation is to ensure that the decisions that are made respect the children's views but do so in a way that does not undermine their other rights (i.e., to education, health, care). So too in research projects, children's views must be treated with respect and their views must influence the decisions that are made but only when the ultimate effect of that is to further understanding and knowledge of the issues affecting them.

The key to involving children as co-researchers in a way that is respecting of their rights is ultimately dependent on how the children are perceived by the adult researchers. If the children are seen as rights holders (which entails recognition of their competence, agency, and entitlement to influence decisions affecting them), then it follows that their view will be treated seriously and acted upon wherever possible. In particular, children's perspectives that depart from the orthodoxy and challenge the adult researchers' perspectives should be welcomed, discussed, and incorporated at every given opportunity. What should not happen is that the child's views be substituted by the adults each time they vary from the adult norm, as this amounts to tokenistic window dressing, exploiting the pretense of children's participation for a veneer of innovation or academic credibility. In instances when it is not possible, feasible, or sensible to follow up on children's suggestions on an aspect of research questions, method, or interpretation, then the reasons for this should be explained to the children in a way that they can understand. Feedback can provide an incentive for adults to take children's views seriously because it makes it more difficult for adults to solicit children's views and then ignore them (Lundy, 2007).

Alderson (2008) has suggested that a major obstacle to conducting research with children concerns infantilizing them, perceiving and treating them as immature and in doing so producing evidence to reinforce notions of their incompetence. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that researchers need to take care to ensure that the fun, participatory activities that are often used in research with young children are not labeled as "childish" techniques (O'Kane, 2000). These concerns are even more pertinent when the work is being carried out with young children as co-researchers. Although the work that is carried out with the children can and indeed should be fun and engaging, the findings and outputs must be serious. In

particular, we would suggest that adult researchers refrain from presenting participating children's views that they have disregarded for their lack of relevance or common sense to external audiences for color or entertainment, as to do this trivializes and potentially vitiates the other relevant, practical inputs of the children involved. No adult member of the team would have his or her ideas pilloried publicly in this way, and children are entitled to at least the same degree of respect.

In conclusion, if the process of working with young co-researchers is guided by the UNCRC, the relationship will be characterized by respect, transparency, and dialogue. If young children's views are incorporated into the decisions that are made throughout the research process, much will be gained in the quest for high-quality, relevant data on children's lives. Although involving children as co-researchers can be individually and collectively empowering, it is also key in enhancing the "reliability and ethical acceptability" of research with children (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998, pp. 336–337) and in challenging imbalances of power in the research process (Kirby, 2002), ultimately leading to better quality research outcomes. However, it must be recognized that engaging young children as co-researchers in a way that is respectful of their rights is "not a momentary act but an intense exchange between children and adults" (UN, 2009, para. 13). This exchange works two ways: increasing the opportunities for both children *and* adults to increase their skills and knowledge (Alderson, 2008). As in all truly rights-based activity, not only are children's rights respected but the capacity of the duty bearers to fulfill their obligations to children is also enhanced. Working alongside children in order to research and gain understanding of the views and experiences of their peers is in itself a means of realizing children's rights.

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