

Representing Children's Rights from Discussion Through to Illustration and Interpretation



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The Open University's Children's Research Centre (OUCRC) seeks ways to support children and young people (C&YP) to express their views and to carry out research on topics of interest or concern to them. Supported by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Centre works in partnership with a range of organisations to uphold a genuine commitment to listen and learn from C&YP (Kellett, 2010).

Ideas about talking and listening are embedded in debates about C&YP's rights, particularly their autonomy and welfare, and their rights to participate, have a voice and share their experiences. Indeed, participation is frequently heralded as the gold standard of research, policies and practices concerned with childhood (Cooper, Payler, & Bennett, 2019). While the OUCRC is fully committed to promoting diverse approaches to participation, it also takes a critical approach.

As a concept, participation is complex, rarely questioned within a critical arena and often tokenistic in practice. Despite a host of developments that now recognise and value C&YP's contributions, participation often falls short of making a difference to power relations within research practice (Kellett, 2010). C&YP are regularly consulted and listened to, but many report frustration when they feel that contributing their views ultimately does not make any difference or improve their lives (Bucknall, 2014). Adults invariably intervene on final decisions, and representations of C&YP's views continue to be translated and are often censored (Cooper, 2017).



Figure 1: 'Everyone should know about their rights. In our school we promote our rights.'

Over recent months the OUCRC has worked in partnership with Amnesty International UK (AIUK) to support C&YP research through the development of a picture-book with which C&YP can mark the UNCRC's 30th anniversary. A key aim has been to capture C&YP's views of what they would want to see in the book by building in mechanisms to ensure that these 'voices' continue to impact upon and influence the evolution of the project. Doing so constitutes a challenge to the criticism that C&YP's perspectives are frequently shaped through adult versions of 'knowing and telling' (Jones, 2008:199).

From the outset, the project acknowledged the limitations of applying adult, researcher logic to the experiences of C&YP (Cooper, 2015). In practice,



this meant working closely with AIUK to address the challenges of engaging with a child-led approach to research. More specifically, listening and responding to C&YP's views demands a responsive, participatory approach and one that recognises the different ways in which they share those views. The project therefore developed a multi-modal 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 OUCRC had two key objectives for the project. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to critique participatory research at scale, and to develop a research methodology responsive to the diverse ways in which C&YP may choose to express their views. Secondly, it sought to engage C&YP in the research process, from initial data collection through to data analysis and presentation of the findings through published reports.

During phase one (November 2018–February 2019), eight researchers from the OUCRC supported nine projects across England and Wales. The focus of this first phase was to work with and support existing projects, some of which were rights-aware, to capture the rich insights of the C&YP involved about which rights to include in the book.

As the project moves into phase two, the participatory process will continue through the establishment of an advisory group of C&YP that will consult with both AIUK and illustrators about the book's content. The original 100 C&YP involved

in phase one will be given the opportunity to respond to and provide feedback on illustrators' artistic interpretations of their initial ideas. All and any public engagement related to the project – for example, the interim and main reports, press releases and news stories – will be shared where possible with the C&YP prior to the publication of the picture book in spring 2020. In doing so, we will ensure that the children and young people's authentic voices and opinions continue to be both honoured and heard. ■

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