

Australia: Children explore their rights through art

Barbara Piscitelli & Felicity McArdle

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The authors were from the School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. In this article, they discuss work that helped children reveal their idea about their rights through art. The work covered both the joyful and the sober sides of children's perceptions and – sometimes more significantly – their realities; and it produced some potent and graphic images. The article concludes with a set of five practical lessons that cover how to make the work possible with materials and resources that are available. But they also reveal what can happen when what children express is at odds with what some people and policy-makers want to hear.

We are at the beginning of a new era in children's rights – one that promises to be exciting with an abundance of significant legal, administrative, bureaucratic and personal challenges. The topic of children's rights seems to challenge people and, in Australia as well as other countries, there has been a great deal of discussion and comment in the media, the government and the public arena. There are widely diverging views, some of which claim that 'children should be seen and not heard', an outdated maxim of a time before children's rights were protected – yet this sentiment is still held within communities around the world. At the other end of the scale, some people claim that they have nothing to offer in the area of children's rights since they consider the human rights arena to be territory for lawyers and judges; they often remark that the area should be left to the experts. Increasingly, though, the children's rights movement has focused attention on the urgent need to educate children, the community and the professions about children's rights and, in particular, to learn about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). If the new era of children's rights is to flourish, then a concentrated campaign of community awareness must

take place. One major part of the community awareness and education campaign should focus on teaching children about their rights.

Inspired by the work of other small scale children's rights educational projects, a group of educators and artists formed a group in Australia in 1997 to learn how to best develop a way of teaching children about their rights.¹ Together we visited four schools to talk with five to twelve year old children about their rights, and encourage them to depict their views of their rights in drawings, paintings and murals. We found this a most invigorating and exhausting project; invigorating because we learned that children already know a great deal about their rights and exhausting because there is so little available in terms of resources and materials to teach about children's rights. Over the course of the project, we developed materials and activities that would encourage and support a rights perspective in classrooms (Piscitelli & McArdle, 1997). In a search to locate information on teaching about children's rights, we found some books and reference materials to assist us but, for the most part, adapted ideas to suit the interests and life experiences of the local children.

From our philosophical standpoint as early childhood educators, we developed a way to introduce children to the topic of human rights. Our strategies included holding meetings with children to read stories and engage in large group conversations. We read the children's book, *For Every Child, a Better World*,² and discussed different life situations for children around the world. The book opened the door for discussions and questions about health, education, families, working children, war and poverty. In smaller groups, we had more personal conversations, handled questions and looked at photographs of children around the world. The photographs proved to be a good catalyst for more detailed dialogue about how their lives were similar or different to the children in the photographs. Following these conversations, we invited children to think about their rights, and to make a picture that showed one of their most valued rights. The older children also wrote poetry about their human rights as a group activity.

Children's views of their human rights

In our project, children exposed their ideas about their human rights in potent and graphic images. From the joyful and exuberant messages about play to the more sobering images about war and violence, the children's drawings expressed deep emotions and pure desires. In many cases, the children made pictures to convey their sense that no

child, anywhere, should have to suffer from an indignity. The exhibition was titled by one of the ten-year-old girls working on a group collaboration of a large mural. She painted the words Children Have Rights! across the mural - leaving a strong verbal message about the fact that children already had rights. No-one could deny that. She and the other exhibitors spread their messages about human rights to thousands of people all over the world.

The arts seem to be a good vehicle for children to reveal their thoughts about their rights. In our project, we employed the arts as a vehicle for children's visualisation of their human rights. One of our team, visual artist Raquel Redmond, selected a range of art making experiences for children to convey their ideas: drawing, mural making, painting, printmaking and collage. We scaled our choices for the relative age and experience of the children. The youngest children drew and painted, while older children used collage and print-making. The murals were painted by all ages. This wide and diverse range of art making provided us with a rich set of images for an exhibition of the children's views of their human rights. We exhibited the children's ideas at the first Australasian conference on children's rights in Brisbane in 1997 - and received a very warm reception for bringing young children's ideas to the attention of the international conference delegates. The exhibition later toured throughout Queensland and Australia to be viewed by thousands of people in small villages, regional centres and university galleries. From comments in the visitor's books, it is clear that the exhibition provoked interest and controversy because of the views expressed in the children's art.

From the children in this project we learned a great deal about a deep human yearning for a rightful life. In our discussions with these children, we listened, observed and responded as they expressed the desire for all children (not just themselves): to live lives free of war, to live in homes free of domestic violence; to live in a country without poverty; to have good teachers; to have a good education; and to live in good health. Clearly, these children had an idea of their rights and were able to express them. We were, in many ways, surprised to see how well children understood these ideas. But, we still wonder if they know how to protect their rights when faced with many of the biases and prejudices which children experience due to their age and maturity. Because of their vulnerability, those of us who work with and on behalf of children must keep vigilant and must be pro-active in educating both children and the wider community about the rights of children. The conversation we started needs to be sustained on a regular basis in classrooms everywhere so children can develop human rights consciousness.

Five lessons from our project

There is no one way to begin the process of focusing on the rights of children. Each educational environment has its own special community needs and faces its own challenges. In our project, we learned some simple lessons about education for children's rights.

First lesson: start with the environment

Establish a philosophy and a setting that can be seen to be aware of and respectful of the rights of all who come through the door. Develop a program where children can take an active role in making decisions, in caring for their environment and in working collaboratively with others. Infants will learn about their rights in an environment where care providers adapt routines to children's needs, honour their ideas and respond to their actions. Toddlers can take increasing control of their lives, so a rights-based environment should offer choices to children in decision-making, teach children to defend their rights, and protect children's right to play. In preschools, children enjoy learning about their rights by experiencing equal treatment, reading picture books, discussing ideas, exhibiting their drawings and paintings, and thinking about the concept of fairness. In formal school environments, children should extend their participation in rights-based decision making through collaboration to develop class rules that honour each person's rights and responsibilities. In a rights-based environment, children will feel free to discuss their rights and challenge any unfair practices that may exist.

Second lesson: work with what your children know

Talk with children about their rights and listen to what they tell you. Children's ideas will not develop as the result of a single lesson, and adults should become aware that learning about rights takes time. Provide children with many options for exploring the concept of rights: drawing, writing, reading, listening to stories, dramatic play and, most importantly, in their daily interactions with others. As children's ideas evolve, record change in children's understanding of complex questions of what is 'right', or 'fair', or 'just'. Help children to gain awareness of the world at large, and of the lives of children in diverse situations.

Third lesson: rights carry responsibilities

Every right is accompanied by a corresponding responsibility. This lesson is an essential aspect of learning about rights, and should form a framework for a respectful classroom environment. Teachers have many opportunities for teaching about the issue of rights and responsibilities. There is a dynamic link between rights and responsibilities - for every right, each recipient is responsible to handle that right with care. In the case of protection from physical punishment, it is important for children to learn that adults will protect them from harm; it is equally important for children to learn that, in return, you expect them to refrain from causing harm to others as a sign of respect and acknowledgment of their shared human rights and responsibilities. Such lessons are essential in human rights education.

Fourth lesson: everyone has rights; everyone is responsible

Human rights are for everyone. In the implementation of a rights curriculum, children can learn that the respect and dignity offered to them as individuals also belong to every person. Children can (and should) learn that everyone has the same rights, regardless of where they live or what they look like. In a classroom with right-consciousness, children will see that they can play a role on safeguarding human rights by always speaking out when unfair practices occur. Both parents and teachers need to become informed about how to act as guardians to children's rights. When unfair practices are foisted upon children, it is the responsibility of every person to protect and safeguard human rights by taking positive action to assure children's dignity. For this reason, it is important to listen carefully to children's stories about their daily lives and, when warranted, to act on their behalf.

Fifth Lesson: some people and policy makers may not like what you have to say, but you have an ethical responsibility and a human right to speak for children.

In the long effort to reform the ways people treat children, there are bound to be areas of conflict arising from a clash between old and new thinking about children and their rights. It is inevitable that there will be differences of opinion about what constitutes children's rights within each classroom, each community and each country. Yet, it is important to remember that the rights of children are not nationalised - they are universal. So every child, everywhere, has rights.

In defending the place of rights in the lives of children, there will be disputes about the status and competence of children. Some will say that rights are for adults, but the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that rights are present from birth. In our project, children indicated that they already have rights, and that they did not intend to let them be usurped. So, where entrenched injustice to children occurs, each of us has a role to play in upgrading practices, policies and laws to better reflect the rights and dignity of children.

Challenges for the new generation

We recognise that this new generation of children growing up today will be the first in history to have their rights enshrined and protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. When they pass into adulthood, what personal lessons will they bring with them to our societies across the world? Will they bring with them the messages of a respectful environment for all, with rights and responsibility shared equally? Will they know that they can speak for their rights? Will they be able to protect themselves from violations of their rights? In communities all over the world, important work is being done to bring about the dream of a better world for every child. From Italy, Belgium, Cambodia, Australia and many more countries all over the world, there are examples of projects to educate children about their rights, ranging from new curricula to Children's Parliaments. While some projects may be undertaken at a large scale, many of the most important initiatives will be implemented at the grass roots level of local communities where people come together to live and learn. Projects should differ widely to suit the needs of local communities and the emphasis of local situations, yet all projects should have similar emphasis on building enduring and rightful partnerships between children and society - starting in the early years when such initiatives really matter.