

Written evidence submitted by Professor Carol Robinson

Written evidence to House of Commons Select Committee submitted by Carol Robinson, Professor of Children's Rights, Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University.

Contingency planning to minimise negative effects on some of the most vulnerable groups of children in case of any future national emergency

Executive summary

- This submission highlights the need for effective school-based Child Rights' Education to ensure children have the knowledge, skills and confidence to protect themselves, and their rights, in cases where their rights are violated.
- Research has evidenced that where children and adults in schools have knowledge and understanding of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) and understand how these rights apply to children, this increases the number of children disclosing child protection issues ([Sebba and Robinson, 2010](#), 20).
- Despite this, a recent small-scale qualitative project conducted in England indicated that practitioners in Early Year and School settings have very limited knowledge of children's rights generally or of the CRC specifically. Rather, measures to protect children's rights tended to focus on identifying behavioural changes in children which may signal distress and supporting children who are known to have been victims of abuse.
- The impact of COVID-19 has increased the number of children who urgently need to understand their rights and how to uphold these. Since COVID-19 lock down measures it is estimated that 95% of vulnerable children are not attending school ([Children's Commissioner for England, 2020a](#), 3). Furthermore, it is estimated that 829,000 children are currently living with risk but are not known to services ([Clarke et al, 2019](#), 4) and that rates of domestic abuse have increased during the current COVID-19 pandemic ([Children's Commissioner for England, 2020b](#), 1).
- Current Child Rights' Education in schools is limited. Existing rights' education includes teaching primary and secondary school children to recognise if relationships are making them feel unhappy, unsafe or uncomfortable and how to report concerns or abuse and seek help ([DfE, 2019](#), 21-29). Children in secondary school are also taught about legal rights and responsibilities regarding equality; online rights ([DfE, 2019](#), 27-29); civil liberties; the nature of rules and laws; the justice system; and human rights and international law ([DfE, 2013](#), 2-3). The focus of rights' education, however, is on teaching factual information about rights and help available, rather than on empowering children to have the confidence and agency to voice concerns in cases where their rights are not respected. Additionally, there is no specific inclusion of Child Rights' Education or teaching about the CRC.
- If incidences of child rights' violations are to be reduced, both now and in preparation for any future national emergency, Child Rights' Education needs to be incorporated into the teaching of all age groups. I recommend the following:

- i) In the immediate future: practitioners in schools be supported to equip children with the skills and confidence to articulate any instances where they have felt vulnerable, unsafe or where their rights have not been respected during their time away from school due to COVID-19 lock-down measures.
- ii) In planning for the longer term and any future national emergency:
 - a. Child Rights' Education be incorporated into all levels of schooling. This should focus not only on the transmission of knowledge and facts about rights within the CRC but also on increasing practitioners' and children's understanding of the values and behaviours inherent with these rights, and equipping children with the skills, confidence and agency to take action to defend their rights and those of others. Such education should draw on guidance provided by the World Programme for Human Rights Education (United Nations, [2006](#), 12; [2012](#), 13; [2017](#), 15; [2019](#), 3) and on lessons learnt in the development and evaluation of Unicef UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award ([Sebba and Robinson, 2010](#); [Unicef UK Impact Report: 2018](#)).
 - b. Measures be established to ensure current and future school practitioners have a deep understanding of children's rights as detailed in the CRC and how the principles inherent within these rights apply to children's lives and experiences e.g. through initial teacher education and teacher training programmes.

Brief Biography

1. I am a professor of Children's Rights within the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill University. My research interests combine theoretical and empirical work focusing on the voices, experiences, rights and empowerment of children and young people. A major focus of my work has been around developing insights into issues relating to Child Rights' Education. Edge Hill University is one of the largest providers of university-based teacher education in the UK.

Overview of contribution

2. This submission highlights the need for improved school-based Child Rights' Education to effectively equip children with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to seek support in cases of rights violations. Recent research evidence indicates that teachers and other adults in schools, as well as practitioners working with children in other settings, lack awareness of children's rights. They are, therefore, not able to inform children about their rights, the principles inherent within rights or how these apply to children's lives and experiences. Given the reported increase in domestic abuse, and the increasing time children are spending at home with fewer options for alerting someone outside of their family if they feel unsafe, it is paramount that children are educated about rights, how these apply to them and how to uphold their rights in instances where their rights are not respected.

Defining the term 'children'

3. In the context of this contribution, the term 'children' will be used to refer to children and young people from birth to 18, as defined in article 1 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (United Nations, 1989).

Practitioner's understanding of children's rights: findings from recent research

4. Findings from a small-scale qualitative research project I conducted in the north west of England between January and March 2020 (findings not yet published) indicated that practitioners in Early Years, Primary and Secondary School settings have very limited knowledge of children's rights. Of the 76 participants, all were involved in child and/or family-facing services, including family support

workers, foster carers, health visitors, support workers and youth workers, and 23 worked in School/Early Years settings as heads, deputies, teachers, school nurses or school safe guarding leads. Although all participants were aware that children had rights, there was an overall lack of familiarity with any specific rights pertaining to children. Rather, for many participants implementing child rights was perceived as synonymous with being friendly towards children and organising events and activities to enhance children's experiences and enjoyment of life.

5. For practitioners, the protection of children's rights tended to focus around being alert to changes in children's behaviour which may indicate signs of distress (which may or may not be related to children encountering situations in which their rights are not respected), and to supporting children in known cases where their rights have already been violated. There was a lack of focus on empowering children to report situations where they feel vulnerable to the possibility of their rights being violated, or to report very early stages of rights' violations.

6. Children's rights are a sub-set of human rights which are specific to children. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) is an international document which outlines the rights of all children from birth to 18 years old, it was ratified by the UK in 1991. The majority of study participants were not aware of the rights within this document, or how these rights apply specifically to children's lives. If practitioners lack awareness of children's rights within the CRC and how these apply to children, children in schools are unlikely to receive effective or adequate Child Rights' Education.

The importance of Child Rights' Education: findings from previous research commissioned by Unicef UK

7. In an effort to address the lack of Child Rights' Education in schools, Unicef UK developed a [Rights Respecting Schools Award \(RRSA\)](#) which aims to put children's rights at the heart of a school culture. The RRSA supports schools to use the CRC as their values framework. Research to assess the impact of the RRSA found that children and adults in RRSA schools had a clear knowledge and understanding of the CRC and how rights applied to children ([Sebba and Robinson, 2010](#)). Children in RRSA schools also demonstrate confidence in speaking out about issues to adults and this led to an increase in disclosures relating to behaviour disrespectful of rights, meaning that child protection and safe guarding issues can be identified and addressed ([Sebba and Robinson, 2010, 20](#); [Unicef UK Impact Report: 2018, 8](#)). There are currently 5,000 schools working through the RRSA, impacting on 1.6 million children's lives ([Unicef UK website: About the Rights Respecting Schools Award](#)).

The extent of the problem: the increasing number of potentially vulnerable children in the United Kingdom

8. A report published by the Children's Commissioner for England's Office estimated that 2.3 million children in England are living with risk because of a vulnerable family background; of these, 831,000 were found to have been exposed to domestic violence and abuse ([Clarke et al, 2019, 30](#)). These figures do not include children in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

9. In the same report, it was stated that of the 2.3 million children living with risk, 669,000 are being helped through a formal, national programme of support, however, it is estimated that 829,000 are not known to services and, therefore, are not receiving any support ([Clarke et al, 2019, 4](#)). The remaining 761,000 children are known to services but their level of support is unclear, thus some of these children may be receiving no support at all ([Clarke et al, 2019, 4](#)).

10. Furthermore, increasing levels of neglect and abuse are being reported in England, with 198,090 children reported as having been subject to child protection enquiries in 2016-17. This represents an

increase of 122% (89,300) since 2009-10, and an increase of 7% on the previous year ([CRAE, 2018, 6](#)).

11. In addition to the above, there are also concerns connected to children's increased access to digital technology. A UK-wide survey in which 2,059 young people aged 11 to 18 participated, reported that 15 per cent (319) had received a request for a sexual image or message. The group most likely to report that they had received a sexual image or message were girls aged 16 to 18, with 52 per cent of girls in this age group saying they had received a sexual image or message ([Bently et al., 2019, 14](#)). Furthermore, 3 per cent of primary school children and 4 per cent of secondary school children said they had sent a naked or semi-naked picture or video to another young person. Additionally, 2 per cent of children of primary school age said they had sent a naked or semi-naked picture or video to an adult, as had 2 per cent of surveyed secondary school-aged children ([Bently et al., 2019, 15](#)).

The heightened need to empower children to seek support in cases of rights' violations due to lockdown resulting from the COVID19

12. Evidence suggests that rates of domestic abuse have increased during the current COVID-19 pandemic ([Children's Commissioner for England, 2020b, 1](#)).

13. Since lock down measures many vulnerable children will not have been able to access support through schools, children and youth groups, health visitors, social workers, friends or family members not living at home. They could, therefore, have been staying at home with fewer options for alerting someone outside of their immediate family if they feel unsafe. The situation is particularly worrying given that since lock down measures, 95% of vulnerable children are reported as not attending school ([Children's Commissioner for England, 2020a, 3](#)).

Curriculum provision in England to support children's understanding of their rights and how to seek support where their rights are not respected

14. Rights' Education in schools is taught as part of Relationships, Health and Citizenship education lessons. In June 2019 the Department for Education published Statutory Guidance ([DfE, 2019](#)) for the teaching of Relationships Education (for primary age pupils), Relationships and Sex Education (for secondary age pupils), and Health Education (for both primary and secondary pupils). Schools were encouraged to start teaching these subjects from September 2019 and they will become a statutory part of the school curriculum for all state funded schools in England from September 2020. Citizenship education is non-statutory for primary schools but is part of the statutory national curriculum for secondary schools in England.

15. Within the remit of Relationships, Health and Citizenship education lessons there is an expectation that pupils in primary schools will be taught to recognise if relationships are making them feel unhappy, unsafe or uncomfortable and how to report concerns or abuse and seek help ([DfE, 2019, 21-22](#); [DfE, 2015, 2-4](#)). In secondary schools there is an expectation that pupils will be taught how to recognise when a relationship is unsafe; what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence and why these are unacceptable; legal rights and responsibilities regarding equality; online rights; how to report and seek advice if needed for themselves or others ([DfE, 2019, 27-29](#)); civil liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the UK; the nature of rules, laws and the justice system; and human rights and international law ([DfE, 2013, 2-3](#)).

Why current school-based Rights' Education is inadequate to effectively equip children with the knowledge, skills and confidence to uphold their rights when these are not respected

16. While the curriculum provides for some teaching of Rights' Education, the focus is on the teaching of factual information about rights and help available, rather than on empowering children to have the confidence and agency to voice concerns in cases where their rights are not respected. Furthermore, there is no specific inclusion of Child Rights Education.

17. The first phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education ([United Nations, 2006](#)) emphasised the requirement for schools to support children to develop an understanding of how rights apply to their own situations. All four phases of this programme have asserted that school-based Rights' Education should encompass:

- i) Knowledge and skills — learning about human rights and human rights mechanisms and acquiring skills to apply them in a practical way in daily life;
- ii) Values, attitudes and behaviour — developing values and reinforcing attitudes and behaviour which uphold human rights;
- iii) Action — taking action to defend and promote human rights. (United Nations, [2006](#), 12; [2012](#), 13; [2014](#), 4; [2019](#), 3).

Conclusion and recommendations

18. If incidences of child rights' violations are to be reduced, children need to know and understand how rights apply to them in the context of their lives and be empowered to uphold their rights when these are not respected. UNICEF UK's RRSA goes some way towards helping children to achieve this. However, not all children attend RRSA schools, and even where they do, an emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring all pupils are empowered to seek support in cases of rights' violations.

19. When considering how to prepare children for any possible future national emergency, especially where children may be spending longer periods of time with adults who may make them feel unsafe and have fewer opportunities to voice these concerns, it is recommended that the following action is taken:

- i) In the immediate future: practitioners in schools be supported to equip children, on their return to school after spending time away from school due to COVID-19 lock-down measures, with the skills and confidence to articulate any instances where they have felt vulnerable, unsafe or where their rights have not been respected during their time away from school.
- ii) In planning for the longer term and any future national emergency:
 - a) Child Rights' Education be incorporated into all levels of schooling. This should focus not only on the transmission of knowledge and facts about rights within the CRC but also on increasing practitioners' and children's understanding of the values and behaviours inherent with rights, and equipping children with the skills, confidence and agency to take action to defend their rights and those of others. Such education should draw on guidance provided by the World Programme for Human Rights Education (United Nations, [2006](#), 12; [2012](#), 13; [2017](#), 15; [2019](#), 3) and on lesson learnt in the development and evaluation of Unicef UK's RRSA ([Sebba and Robinson, 2010](#); [Unicef UK Impact Report: 2018](#)).
 - b) Measures be established to ensure current and future school teachers, other educators and child and family-facing service professionals, have a deep understanding of children's rights as detailed in the CRC and how the principles inherent within these rights apply to children's lives and experiences, e.g. through initial teacher education and teacher training programmes.

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