Children's Views on Children's Rights: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Children's rights are set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This systematic literature review aimed to investigate children's views of children's rights, at a broad level. Nine papers were included, from a range of countries and contexts. They all accessed the views of children and young people (aged up to 18 years). A content analysis was carried out using a recursive process of hybrid aggregative-configurative synthesis, and themes within children's views and factors that may affect these were identified. These were 'awareness of rights', 'value placed on (importance of) rights', 'impact of having/not having rights fulfilled', 'realisation and respect of rights', 'equality of rights', 'identifying and categorising of rights', and 'factors that may affect children's views'. These were developed into a progression of rights realisation and implications for practice and further research were considered.

Keywords

children's views – children's rights – review – UNCRC

1 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out rights of every child, consisting of 54 Articles which include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all children (Save the Children, n.d.-b; UNICEF, 2005; United Nations, 1989). Further to the specific Articles of the UNCRC, there are four overarching core principles: of non-discrimination, devotion to the best interests of the child, the rights to life, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child (often referenced as participation or “children’s voice”) (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003; Woods and Bond, 2014). Notably, however, the conceptualisation and integration of these “general principles” at their foundation within the UNCRC has been shown to be weak (Hanson and Lundy, 2017). Whilst this review does not take a specific focus on the participation principle, often specifically related to Articles 12–17, it does relate to the rationale of this review which has a focus upon children’s views of their rights. Since the UNCRC has been established, significant amounts of scholarly, research and practitioner attention has focused upon this (Anderson and Graham, 2016; Quennerstedt and Moody, 2020; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan, 2015; Wyse, 2001).

Since the adoption of the UNCRC, the principles have frequently been divided into three groups (often known as the 3 Ps), of provision, protection and participation (Hammarberg, 1990; Thomas, 2011). Quennerstedt (2010: 633) argues that these in fact have a hampering effect and suggests ‘constructing what children’s rights are about from a general human rights language of civil, political and social rights will form a better base for research’.

The “3Ps”, the four guiding principles, and the 54 Articles have created much research and critical debate both from children’s rights scholars and from those working within the framework of the UNCRC (Hanson and Lundy, 2017). Byrne and Lundy (2019), focusing on creation of rights-based policy, described the comprehensiveness of the UNCRC as one of its many advantages, but also noted that even from the four principles, there tends to be a focus on two of these (best interests and participation), arguably distorting overall understanding. Prior to the adoption of the UNCRC, Melton (1980) carried out research to find out children’s perspectives on children’s rights, noting that ‘until the present study, no one had even asked children what they think about their rights’ (Melton, 1980: 186), and without the framework of the UNCRC focus, this was researched more generally, and found that age, stage of cognitive development and SES status affected children’s concepts of their rights and also their attitudes towards them.

Further to this, and perhaps as further evidence to the poor integration of the principles of the UNCRC to its provisions (Hanson and Lundy, 2017), it is documented that children were not directly involved to any significant extent in the drafting of the UNCRC, which seems somewhat paradoxical to the principle of participation (Lundy *et al.*, 2015) and Lundy *et al.* (2015) speculate upon the question of what might have been the consequences had children been involved in the drafting process. It has been established that, when listened to, children are good reporters (UNICEF, 2012) and that, following Melton and Limber (1992), adults will only comprehensively identify what is important to children by being aware of their views (Taylor *et al.*, 2001).

Nonetheless, there is, since the drafting of the UNCRC, clear recognition of the importance of gaining children's views on their rights (Peterson-Badali and Ruck, 2008; Lundy *et al.*, 2015). Melton and Limber (1992) suggest four reasons to do so: as a foundation for advocacy, noting that even trained professionals may not be skilled in identifying what matters most to children; as helping to design structure and procedures to support children's dignity as rights are implemented; as asking children for their views in itself signals respect for these; and, of least importance to Melton and Limber, for the potential legal, political and socialising effects of this. Morrow (1999: 151) identified the generation of children's rights work by adults and suggested pertinent questions to answer including:

How do children conceive of the notion of rights? What do they think their rights should be? Are they aware of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child? Do they feel that they have a say in making decisions (Article 12)? Do they want participatory rights? Does it ultimately matter what they think?

At this time, she recognised this as a growing area, as did Taylor *et al.* (2001), who nevertheless identified a scarcity of studies exploring views of children and young people (CYP) on their rights, and how these may differ from adults. This research took place in New Zealand with a focus on awareness and understanding of rights. The authors summarised what had been found about children's views, and factors that may affect these, including age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, ethnicity; they also indicated that previous studies suggested significant percentages of children were not familiar with the UNCRC. Similarly, Alderson (2000) found more than three quarters of pupils surveyed had not heard about the UNCRC, and most of the others had heard only a small amount. This is despite Article 42 which states that children, young people and adults should know about the Convention and steps should

be taken to achieve this (United Nations, 1989). Taylor *et al.* (2001) recognised the potential role of schools as places for both pupils and staff to develop understanding of rights.

The complexity of the UNCRC is identified as a barrier (for adults) to implementing a child-rights approach (Williams, 2017) and is clearly not a simple document for children to access, even with an understanding that children can cope and engage with complex information (see Sargeant and Gillett-Swan, 2015). There do now exist child-friendly copies of the UNCRC (Save the Children, n.d.-a; The Scottish Government, 2008; UNICEF, n.d.-a) and these appear to offer ways to make the UNCRC more accessible for children, from a young age. Further development of this is a current focus for Child Rights Connect linked to the 30th Anniversary (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.). There are also focused ways to implement, support and develop children's education about their rights, such as through Unicef UK's rights-respecting schools award, and in a variety of other publications used in and beyond the UK (for example, see Brantefors and Quennerstedt's research synthesis, 2016).

The present review aims to identify and synthesise findings from a range of primary research studies to present a view upon children's views of children's rights, and as such includes research from different countries, ages, groups (such as those in residential care) and level of exposure to children's rights. The importance of understanding constructions of children's rights through children's views and experiences at a broad, and indeed global, level and considering their different contexts, is identified by Stalford and Lundy (2020). It is fundamental within the UNCRC itself, within the guiding principles, the 3Ps and the specific articles.

2 Methodology

From a background in professional practice, the researchers adopted a critical realist approach in conceptualising and structuring this review (Fletcher, 2017). This has the advantage of communicating a particular understanding of "rigour" which is readily understandable to professional practice communities (e.g. children's services workers) and policy makers/influencers (Gough and Thomas, 2017). (The limitations of this approach are considered at a later point in this paper.)

From the research question of "What are children's views on children's rights?", included research needed to access the views of children (up to 18 years) about children's rights and this needed to be at a general or "meta" level,

for all or some of the focus of the paper. The authors read carefully around this aim, with recognition of the nuanced nature of identifying relevant literature. There is much research which implicitly recognises the need to access children's views and acknowledges the importance of children's rights, without these being the focus of the research itself. Databases searched included: ASSIA (via ProQuest), ERIC (via ProQuest) and PsycInfo (via Ovid Online). These three databases were selected in order to gather research from a range of discipline areas including education, social sciences and psychology, with a focus on accessing research on children's views. Whilst the importance of interdisciplinarity is recognised (see Stalford and Lundy, 2020), it was beyond the scope of the authors to extend searches further for this review. The three databases were searched using NOFT (ASSIA, ERIC) and within Abstract and within Title (PsycInfo) on 2–4 January 2019 and generated a total of 1,536 returns, including duplications, using the following search terms:

- 'child* rights' OR UNCRC OR 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'

and

- child* OR young people OR student* OR pupil* OR adolescent*

and

- concept* OR perspective* OR view* OR attitude* OR perceive OR awareness OR perception* OR opinion* OR thought* OR value*

Each paper was scanned by title, and where necessary by abstract, and papers that did not meet the mandatory criteria of accessing children's views about children's rights were excluded. This left a shortlist of 116 studies, from ASSIA (6), ERIC (72), PsycInfo Abstract (30) and PsycInfo Title (8). Using the same search terms, a hand search of *The International Journal of Children's Rights* from the last ten years was carried out as were Google searches, and experts¹ within relevant fields were consulted, together providing another five papers at this stage.

The authors recognise there is a "grey area" around research relevance, and searched for papers with a focus upon children's view of their rights in general, rather than any specific area of rights (e.g. participation, protection, UNCRC). Search terms did not include "voice" and "participation", as earlier scoping showed that this understandably added a large body of research with a focus on participation as a specific aspect within the UNCRC. This review aimed to access a broader view.

1 Experts working within the field of children's rights, from the areas of critical psychology, school psychology, social care and law, and identified by specialist academics working at The University of Manchester, were consulted by email and/or telephone conversation to support identification of relevant studies.

In order to create a final list that most reliably accessed these, several papers were discussed in detail between the authors, using the abstracts and in six cases, the full papers. A conservative approach was taken which required agreement of both authors in order for papers to be included. To meet inclusion criteria, papers were required to have a focus on rights generally and not only on specific rights, or UNCRC Articles, or with a specific focus such as on “nurturance” or “self-determination”. Research was not excluded if it did not use the UNCRC specifically as a framework. Papers were manually filtered to include all those published within the last ten years (2009–2019) and grey literature was not included. Whilst this exclusion decision and cut off period was not linked to any specific event or legislation, it has the benefit of accessing views from children in a contemporary context, whilst also providing a dataset of manageable proportions.

The review did not extend to search for research reported in languages other than English. Nonetheless, if the search terms had produced abstracts (and not full papers) written in English, the authors would have sought assistance to translate these.

This process led to 15 papers being identified as suitable for inclusion. These were each read in full and a further six papers were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria; for example, including pupil participants who were over the age of 18 years, or utilising a structured and directive approach focused on outcomes of children’s rights training. This was due to some research focusing on knowledge of structured content pre and post teaching on children’s rights, without gathering children’s more broadly formed views about their rights, either pre- or post- rights teaching, which was the primary focus on this review.

The final inclusion criteria required papers to:

- access the views of children (up to 18 years) about children’s rights;
- have a general or “meta” rights focus, and not a narrow focus on specific rights or rights frameworks;
- be peer-reviewed research published in the last ten years;
- not use a structured and directive approach focused on outcomes of rights training/education.

Full review then progressed with the evaluation of the remaining nine papers. It is relevant to note that two of these, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) and af Ursin and Haanpää (2018), utilise the same dataset but with differing scope and analyses.

Gough’s (2007) Weight of Evidence (WofE) framework was used. Quantitative and/or qualitative review frameworks as appropriate to the specific piece of research were used critically to review the nine papers for methodological

quality (WofE A). The qualitative investigation and evaluation papers utilised the frameworks used by Bond *et al.* (2013) in their review of the effectiveness of solution focused brief therapy (cf. also Law and Woods, 2018). Each paper was coded with final scores assigned up to 14 points, with criteria including execution of data collection, analysis close to data, evidence of explicit reflexivity and evidence of attention to ethical issues.

The quantitative investigations utilised a framework previously used by Flitcroft and Woods (2018), and Woodley-Hume and Woods (2019), and based on research appraisal guidelines (Genaïdy *et al.*, 2007; Wallace and Wray, 2011). These were coded with final scores assigned up to 16 points, with criteria including clear research question or hypothesis, multi-level or intergroup analyses, limitations of the research and implications of findings. Following Bond *et al.* (2013), mixed methods research was coded using both frameworks. As frameworks had different totals, final scores were converted to percentages to allow for comparison, and the higher percentage was used. Following Law and Woods (2018), these percentages were then used to categorise each paper as high quality (67–100 per cent), medium quality (34–66 per cent), or low quality (33 per cent or less).

Each paper was also rated for methodological appropriateness (WofE B). In this case, papers were assessed as high if they used qualitative methods, medium for mixed methods and low for quantitative methods. Whilst the use of qualitative methods enables gathering of data close to participant views, quantitative research also adds relevant information about these (cf. Law and Woods, 2018).

Each paper was also evaluated for relevance of focus (WofE C) and categorised as:

- high (central and open focus on children's views on children's rights in general);
- medium (partial and open focus on children's views on children's rights in general *or* central focus on children's views on children's rights with (de)limiting context/framework);
- low (tangential focus on children's views on children's rights in general).

Approximately one third ($n = 3$) of these papers were reviewed by both authors for the purpose of moderating evaluation, and inter-rater agreement percentages following joint moderation were calculated at an average of 97 per cent final inter-rater agreement; the remaining six papers were read in their entirety and reviewed by the first author.

Each paper was read several times by the first author and key data from each paper was mapped and summarised (see Table 1). A content analysis of the findings of each paper was then carried out (cf. Brantefors and Quennerstedt,

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Magalhães, E., Calheiros, M. M. and Antunes, C. (2018). Portugal	29 x 12–18 year olds; 6 settings; 15 males, 14 females. In residential settings.	Impact of rights on psychosocial functioning; perceptions of rights. Focus group: Part 1- open questions Part 2- exploration of categories from previous study. Qualitative analysis based on grounded theory.	High	High	Medium

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Kosher, H. and Ben-Arieh, A. (2017).	Over 54,000 children aged 8, 10, and 12 years. Through schools. Examine the relationship between children's perceptions of their rights, their reports on participation and their SWB across modeling	education, private life, perceived social image, non-discrim- ination, and respect for themselves and their families by the protection system. 52% of children reported they knew about children's rights and thought adults respect children's rights. 37% knew about CRC; clear variation by country.	High	Low	Medium

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers (cont.)

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
16 countries: Colombia, England, Germany, Estonia, Malta, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Ethiopia, Romina, Algeria, Israel, Turkey, South Korea, and Nepal.	different nations, (uses data age groups and gender. of the ISCWeB) second wave 12-year olds; younger children more likely to think that adults respect children's rights. Children's knowledge and perceptions of their rights associated with children's partici- pation in different contexts in their lives and with subjective well-being.	Fewer 8-year olds knew about rights and CRC than 10 and 12-year olds; younger children more likely to think that adults respect children's rights. Children's knowledge and perceptions of their rights associated with children's partici- pation in different contexts in their lives and with subjective well-being.			

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Yan Lam Lo, Yan Wing Leung and Wai Wa Yuen (2015). Hong Kong	<i>Questionnaire</i> School 1: 100 students (s); 33 teachers(t) School 2: 160s; 12t <i>Focus group</i> School 1: 14s; 3t School 2: 23s and 6t Student mean age: School 1: 15.64yrs School 2: 17.17yrs School-based.	Teachers gave higher ratings than pupils in many areas in both schools; differences were greater and more significant in more traditional school. There were higher mean scores in the more liberal school.	Low	Medium	Medium

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers (*cont.*)

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Hareket, E. and Yel, S. (2017).	156 x 4th grade students (aged 9–11 years) Investigate children's awareness, perceptions and views about children's rights.	Open-ended question- naire; written compositions; focus group discussions. Content analysis.	Medium	High	Medium

Turkey	School-based.	Five themes:
		children's rights re
		basic needs of life
		and developmental
		period needs
		(N = 347); children's
		rights re legal
		assurances (N = 147);
		children's rights
		re freedoms and
		personal qualifi-
		cations (N = 118);
		children's rights
		re personal develop-
		ment and social life
		(N = 100); and
		children's rights
		vis-a-vis responsibili-
		ties (N = 33).			

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Munongi, L. and Pillay, J. (2018). South Africa	Grade 9 pupils; females x 95; males x 90 aged 13–15 years. In school. Determine chil- dren’s experiences of their rights. Open-ended question, with written response, (from part of a larger questionnaire). Content analysis.	Identified four themes: children’s awareness of having rights (92%) and the importance of rights (40%); people’s ignorance of children’s rights (64%); children’s rights should not be violated (45%) yet, adults are violating them (51%); and children’s misunderstanding of rights (41%).	High	High	High

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers (cont.)

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Quennerstedt, A. (2016).	38 children in total; aged 8 years and 12 years. Expand the understanding of what human rights mean to children in the educational setting, and to contribute to new ways of thinking about rights for children.	Paired interviews (each child interviewed twice). Analysis- 2 steps: starts with children's words and then connects to framework.	High	High	Medium
Sweden	In school.	Most of the rights children claimed fit into the established human rights framework within the categories of civil (the most strongly claimed category) political and socio-economic rights. Some rights expressed by children go beyond this framework.	High	High	Medium

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Khoury- Kassabri, M. and Ben-Arieh, A. (2009). Israel	1427 Christian, Jewish and Muslim adoles- cents aged 12–14 years: In school. Examine the contribution of school climate to children's views of their rights (in comparison with other cultural and familial factors).	The more adolescents described their school and teachers as open to their criticism, the greater their support of children's rights. Differences were identified between Jewish and Arab (Muslim and Christian) groups and gender differences were also found.	High	Low	Medium
Dunhill, A. (2018).	17 x 5–11 year olds; 2 x mem- bers of teaching staff from one school. Explore the perspectives of rights with children who attend a Rights Respecting School.	Participatory research method (between children and researcher).	High	High	Low

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers (cont.)

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
England	In school (workshop at conference). (Demonstrate that teaching and supporting children's rights encourages chil- dren to practise, protect and pro- mote the rights of others.)	Walk and talk tour, Rights Respecting Working Group meetings, and presenting at workshops. Qualitative analysis using children's quotes.	Children wanted to continue to support the rights of all children in the school and identified a positive effect that learning about rights had on improving relationships and behaviour. Children recognised that rights were not always realised.		
af Ursin, P.K. and Haanpää. L. (2018).	17,369 children aged 8, 10 and 12 years. Investigate children's awareness and	Survey using 3-point scale: Approximately one third of the children reported knowing about the CRC (31.8%)	High	Low	Medium

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, Israel, Malta, Nepal, Norway, Romania South Korea, Algeria, Colombia, Germany, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, England	In school. knowledge of their rights and their perceptions about respect given to their rights across different countries (and democ- racy index) and larger-scale factors and social structures:	and just under half reported they knew what rights children had (45.4%). 59% children felt that their rights were respected (59.4%). It was found with modest significance that children with immigrant backgrounds felt that their rights were more respected by adults than children without immigrant backgrounds.			

TABLE 1 Summary table of included papers (*cont.*)

Authors Countr(-ies) of research	Key features –Study design and sample –Study aims –Methodology and measures used	Key relevant findings	WoE A Method- ological quality	WoE B Method-ological appropriateness	WoE C Relevance of focus
		The social factors showing the greatest difference on rights outcomes (overall) were level of deprivation and home and school climate.			

FIGURE 1 Summary of data analysis and synthesis

2016), which supported a recursive process of hybrid aggregative-configurative synthesis (Gough *et al.*, 2013), which referenced both broad conceptualisations of children’s rights, as well as to the principles of the UNCRC and its Articles. This process is summarised in Figure 1 above:

3 Findings

The nine studies included four qualitative investigations and one qualitative evaluation, three quantitative investigations and one mixed methods investigation (see Table 1, above). Each study accessed the views of children about

their rights at a general level, was peer-reviewed and published between 2009 and 2019. Three studies used a focus group, two studies used a survey (based on the same survey, the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB)), four used a questionnaire (including one focused on one open-ended question as part of a larger questionnaire), one used interviews, one included a written composition and one used a participatory research method. The studies come from a range of countries; the two using the ISCWeB data utilise data from 16 countries. The other studies each focused on one country.

Whilst each study focused on children's rights at a general level, the contexts were different. Most collected data through schools, and one collected data in residential care settings. The foci of the studies included:

- psychosocial functioning;
- a human rights friendly ethos in school;
- perceptions of rights including in relation to participation and subjective well-being and across different countries, age groups and gender;
- experiences of rights;
- what human rights means to children in educational settings;
- contribution of school climate to views of rights;
- perspectives of rights;
- awareness and knowledge of rights and perceptions of the respect these are given across different countries, gender and social contexts;
- perspectives of rights when attending a Rights Respecting School.

The synthesised findings have been grouped into themes, which are presented in a thematic network (see Figure 2). Themes 4.1–4.6 are main themes, directly addressing the research question. 4.7 is a secondary theme which emerged from the process of analysis as an integral consideration alongside children's views and the role of context.

FIGURE 2 Thematic network

3.1 *Awareness and Understanding of Rights*

Three studies quantified children's reported awareness of their rights. Where percentage descriptions are used, it may be useful to consider that the actual numbers of children vary greatly across the studies (see Table 1). Munongi and Pillay (2018) found 92 per cent of children in South Africa indicated they have rights. However, children also indicated that parents and teachers did not know about rights and some children also linked this lack of knowledge and awareness to their rights being violated. Children identified other children's misunderstanding of their rights, giving examples such as children claiming their own rights when they wanted to use them as a defence/protection for when they were not upholding the rights of others. In contrast, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found 52 per cent of children reported knowing about children's rights. When looking specifically for awareness of the UNCRC, 37 per cent reported knowing about this, with clear variation by country. af Ursin and Haanpää (2018) found 45 per cent of children reported knowing what rights children had, reducing to 32 per cent reporting knowing about the CRC. In England, the results were lower: Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found approximately one quarter of pupils surveyed knew about the UNCRC (27 per cent), whilst af Ursin and Haanpää (2018) found this to be approximately one fifth (21 per cent) of pupils in the UK as a whole. Exploring perspectives of rights with children who attended a Rights Respecting School, Dunhill (2018) found children who had this rights-based experience showed an awareness and understanding of themselves as right-holders and that all human beings are rights-holders. The suggestion from the studies overall is that awareness and learning about children's rights, through schools at least, was not consistently embedded practice; it is also unclear, in some of these studies, what level of detailed conceptualisation of rights children have.

In Yan Lam Lo *et al.* (2015), the questionnaire used the term "rights" and "CRC" for some items, apparently assuming pupils would have enough rights awareness to understand these, although they also identify that, 'Traditional schools [like one of the schools in the study] in Hong Kong tend to overemphasize students' responsibilities and avoid mentioning their rights in order to make students obedient and compliant to school rules' (Yan Lam Lo *et al.*, 2015: 196). From the quotes included in the qualitative part of this study, pupils (or teachers) do not use the vocabulary of "rights" apart from one example: 'Many schools claim that they give students freedom, but actually the freedom they offer you does not give you a right to voice, and you can't express your opinions about the inadequacies of school to your teachers' (Yan Lam Lo *et al.*, 2015: 206).

For some parts of her research, Quennerstedt (2016) intentionally moved away from the language of rights, identifying that ‘many children’ were ‘unfamiliar’ with it, and that by talking to children without using the term, children would be better able to explain their own ideas about these. In this case, children’s ideas were then linked to a human rights framework.

These results give a varied picture of children’s awareness of rights, with variation suggested by country, identifying that the mandate of Article 42 to work to ensure that the UNCRC and its principles are known about by adults and children is some way from full realisation.

3.2 *Value and Importance Placed on Rights*

Munongi and Pillay (2018) found 40 per cent of learners indicated the importance of rights and Dunhill (2018) found children wanted to continue to support the rights of all children in the school, and they identified learning about rights as improving relationships (and behaviour), indicating the value of rights to CYP. Hareket and Yel (2017) found children identifying their right to learn their rights (and to defend them) to be the third most commonly occurring category in their study, suggesting children recognised this to be valuable, and that even without rights education they recognised they were not accessing rights or having rights promoted (in school) despite their importance. Studies in this review varied as to whether they focused explicitly on the value and importance of rights. Sometimes this is drawn out and inferred from the perceived impact of having rights fulfilled or not, and the authors recognise the link between these themes. In the studies where importance of rights and children’s attitudes towards them was a focus, CYP appeared to have a positive attitude towards rights when these were perceived as being upheld

3.3 *Impact of Having/Not having Rights Fulfilled*

Several studies gathered views about the impact of rights being fulfilled, or not. Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) found that children support children’s rights more strongly when they describe their school and teachers as being open to their criticism. Arguably, this may suggest that children perceive openness to criticism as indicative of more evenly balanced power relationships, and within that context feel that their rights are more evident and tangible. (The present authors offer this particular nuanced interpretation transparently, allowing, and indeed encouraging, other readers to consider alternative possible interpretations.)

Linked to this, is that Kosher and Ben-Arieh found that children who felt their rights were more respected appeared more satisfied, leading to an identified association between children’s views on their rights, their participation,

and their subjective well-being (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2017). One of the findings by Lo *et al.* (2015) was that pupils' views did not match exactly with teachers' views, and the level of disagreement between teachers and pupils was more significant when the school environment was less supportive of human rights. This may suggest that higher levels of support for children's rights may encourage more shared perspectives between children and adults, and further indicates the importance of accessing children's views about this. Magelhaus' (2018) findings identified children's views that compromising some rights impacted (negatively) on their psychosocial functioning, resulting in internalising and externalising problems such as feelings of sadness, loneliness and emotional insecurity, and physical and verbal aggression. In this study, the CYP were children living in residential care settings and Magelhaus emphasised the importance of recognising the influence of social context for all children.

Some children's quotes in Hareket and Yel's (2017) study indicate not only that some children view being happy as a right, but also that only by fulfilling the rights they identify will children be happy. For example, one child's response is that, 'As children, we have the right to play comfortably and as much as we want. We can be happy only this way. All the children have the right to be happy and cheerful' (Hareket and Yel, 2017: 347).

In Dunhill's (2018) study, children identified learning about rights (in combination with accessing a rights-respecting school environment) had a positive effect on improving relationships and behaviour. Dunhill also described children who have accessed this as 'rights holders but also upholders of rights' (Dunhill, 2018: 24), recognising this rights education and environment as preparing children for their experiences beyond school, as global citizens.

Across differing contexts and *foci*, then, it appears that children identify the positive impact of accessing their rights, and the necessity of this, so as to be able to share their views and for their increased well-being, including in their relationships with others.

3.4 *Realisation and Respect of Rights*

Children's views show their awareness of others, including adults, needing to know, understand and support both their own and other children's rights. af Ursin and Haanpää (2018) found 59 per cent of children felt their rights were respected by adults, and Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found 52 per cent of children overall thought adults in their country respected their rights. The authors identified variation by country, from 35 per cent to 83 per cent, and by age, with younger children more likely to feel adults respected their rights.

Munongi and Pillay (2018) found 64 per cent of children felt many people did not know and understand these and this led to a violation of their rights.

Additionally, 45 per cent of children identified the need to report violations of their rights, although it was unclear whether children had tried to do so and/or what the impact of this was/was felt to be. Notably, Lo *et al.*, (2015) found there were criticisms made by pupils who felt their rights were not being realised, indicating the value they place on this access. Dunhill (2018) found children recognised (other) children's rights were not always upheld; the examples given are about children living in other parts of the world so it is unclear whether children have an understanding of, for example, experiences of children who may live nearby, in the same community, but attend a school without a focus on being rights-respecting.

3.5 *Equality of Rights*

Several studies explored children's concepts of rights, and rights they identified or claimed, and found some rights occurred more frequently. Magelhaus (2018) found CYP in residential care to feel psychosocial functioning was affected when particular rights were compromised; private life, perceived social image, non-discrimination, and respect for themselves and their families. Within Harakat and Yel's categories of rights, there were certain rights codes identified with more frequency than others (Harakat and Yel, 2017). The codes with a frequency of 40 or over came mainly from their "basic needs and developmental period needs" category and are 'to play' (77), 'to be respected' (72), 'to be loved and cared for' (55) and 'to be happy and cheerful' (40), and also, from their "legal assurances" category: 'to learn their rights and defend these when necessary' (66) and 'to attend school and to get an education' (41). Similarly, Quennerstedt (2016) identified the rights which she described as 'strongly claimed' by the children in her study. She framed these within the "vocabulary of human rights" and they come mainly under the civil rights category, and included 'not being hit', 'not being shouted at', 'being valued and treated as others', 'not being hurt with words', with one strongly claimed socio-economic right, which was 'to go to school and learn'.

3.6 *Identifying and Categorising Rights*

Several studies classified identified rights and did so in different ways. Two (af Ursin and Haanpää, 2018; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2017) used the UNCRC within their relative ISCWeB survey data; in addition to finding out whether children knew about the UNCRC, they found out whether children felt they knew "what rights children have". Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) explored children's concepts of rights within the context of the UNCRC and its Articles, and described "misconceptions" where children's views did not align with this framework. Quennerstedt (2016) wanted to access children's views without

the constraints of a framework and removed the language of “rights” entirely for some parts of the research and where the term “rights” was used, her preferred framework was of one of human (as opposed to children’s) rights, split into categories of civil rights, political rights and socio-economic rights. When qualitative data was gained without boundaries imposed by frameworks, some studies found children to identify rights not directly included within the UNCRC. Quennerstedt (2016: 664) identified a category within her data, of “rights that go beyond HR [human rights] categorisation”. These were: “teachers who care and support”, “feel safe”, and “play and have fun”. Linked to this, Hareket and Yel’s (2017) fourth most frequent code (frequency of 55) was “to be loved and cared for” and “to be happy and cheerful” (40) was also frequently occurring (Hareket and Yel, 2017). Magelhaus (2018) found children also identified positive and supportive relationships as protective factors for their psychological functioning, and this appears to link to the [teachers who] “care and support” category of Quennerstedt (2016).

Hareket and Yel (2017) pointed to some rights identified by children as equally interpretable as responsibilities: in one example, a child linked their right to do tests and study to their aspiration of being successful in lessons and exams (which in turn they may have identified as supporting rights such as education).

Whilst some of these rights, from each of the studies, can map on to the UNCRC, they do not represent all rights and some do not map directly on to this framework at all. These are rights which included emotional and relational aspects and how children feel, e.g. *feeling* safe, not only being safe.

3.7 *Factors that May Affect Children’s Views*

The studies in this review investigated and evaluated a range of factors which may impact on children’s views of their rights.

3.7.1 Age

Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found younger children to report less knowledge and awareness of children’s rights, yet this group also displayed higher levels of agreement that adults respected their rights. These researchers argued this was due to the poorer understanding (of the concepts of children’s rights) of the youngest children, although no significant age differences were found relating to children’s views on their participation.

3.7.2 Gender

Significant gender differences were not consistently found. af Ursin and Haanpää (2018) found minor differences, with a small number of countries

identified where gender did appear to affect children's views. Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009), however, found female adolescents were more likely than males to support most of the children's rights measures examined, with the exception of rights within the public/governmental context and that this was the case for both nationality groups in their sample. Magelhaus (2018) identified gender differences in psychological outcomes; with more males reported externalising behaviours when rights were not fulfilled.

3.7.3 National/Cultural

Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) identified cross-national differences in children's knowledge and perceptions of their rights and their views about their participation. They linked this to the cultural model of rights; that children's knowledge and views of their rights are constrained by their experiences of these (Ruck *et al.*, 2014), and identified that it can be argued children's views appear to be shaped in a "specific cultural, national, and political environment" (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2017: 267). Ursin and Haanpää (2018) identified high levels of variation by country for each of the questions children answered about their rights and linked this to children's lived experiences. Similarly, Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) identified differences in views linked to cultural background, specifically that overall Jewish children were more supportive of children's rights compared to Arab peers including in a personal context, and Arab adolescents more strongly supported rights within a public/governmental context.

3.7.4 School Ethos/Climate (Including School Leaders and Teachers)

Yan Lam Lo *et al.* (2015) found a rights-respecting school ethos was related to a greater agreement between teachers and pupils with school mission, structure for enforcing discipline, structure for the appeal of rights, structure for student participation and attitudes of teachers recognised as relevant factors; the more rights-respecting ethos also had higher mean outcomes for these areas. Similarly, Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) identified the role of school climate, with their link between schools and teachers being open to criticism and the increase in CYP support for children's rights. Ursin and Haanpää (2018) also identified school climate as a factor that impacted on children's views of rights. One study, (Dunhill, 2018) focused on children's views when they attended a rights-respecting school and concluded this encouraged children to "practice, protect and promote the rights of others within their school" and that they also considered their potential "not only in the school but also in their community and globally" (Dunhill, 2018: 24).

3.7.5 Relationships

Relational factors ("perceived social support") were identified as important by Magelhaus (2018) as were "socio-cognitive variables" (perceived benefits or perceived favouritism) in affecting perceptions of CYP (Magelhaus, 2018: 20). Contrastingly, Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009: 100) found teacher-student relationships had low correlations with children's support of children's rights. In Lo *et al.* (2015), however, it is difficult to separate out the relational and the school climate/ethos influences; for example, some of the features of the school with the more rights-respecting ethos include gaining views of pupils which may in turn help to build a positive relationship.

3.7.6 Social Context

In Munongi and Pillay's study (2018), the impact of social context is also linked to the country in which the study is carried out. 92 per cent of children from South Africa showed an awareness of rights and the authors recognised the country's "strong history of violation of human rights due to Apartheid..." and government help for "children to be more aware of their rights to promote social justice among its citizens" (Munongi and Pillay, 2018: 288). More generally, af-Ursin and Haanpää (2018) investigated a range of social factors and found those to have the greatest difference on rights outcomes (overall) were level of deprivation and home climate (and they identified school climate in this category, already classified above). They also found, with modest significance, children with immigrant backgrounds felt their rights were more respected by adults than children without immigrant backgrounds, and recognised this as needing further investigation. Similarly, Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh (2009) identified the role of family factors, and Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found that the more children reported their parents listened to them and treated them fairly, the more they were satisfied with their family life and with their life overall.

4 Discussion

4.1 *Summary of Findings*

This review examines children's views on children's rights and identifies factors affecting these. Analysis of nine papers revealed the following themes: awareness of rights, value placed on (importance of) rights, impact of having/not having rights fulfilled, realisation and respect of rights, equality of rights, identifying and categorising of rights, and factors that may affect children's views.

The UNCRC sets out to protect and promote children's rights and yet many children who do not know about this, or about their rights more broadly. For example, in England approximately one quarter of children are aware of the UNCRC (Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2017). Some children identify that many people generally are not children's rights aware and identify this as a block to their rights being realised (Munongi and Pillay, 2018). Article 42 (United Nations, 1989) seeks to ensure all duty bearers know about children's rights; if many children do not know about them, or feel adults know and/or respect them, how can they be truly protected, provided and promoted?

Children appear to value, to want to know and learn their rights, and to feel positive about them; this applies both to children who have received direct rights experience and education and those who have not (Hareket and Yel, 2017). Furthermore, when children have accessed a rights-respecting environment they wish to continue to support the rights of all children (Dunhill, 2018).

Children identify a negative impact on their psychosocial development when they do not fully access their rights whilst in residential care (Magelhaus, 2018), a specific focus within the UNCRC (Articles 20 and 21 UN, 1989). Rights-respecting environments can have positive impacts upon adult-pupil relationships (Yan Lam Lo *et al.*, 2015); furthermore, pupils can use their own views and understanding as rights-holders to consider their own rights and the rights of others (Dunhill, 2018).

Children identify some rights, themes and principles with greater frequency than others, including concepts going beyond the legal entitlements and specific provisions of the UNCRC. This is not to say that the views they share can or should be easily interpreted in the context of existing rights framework of the UNCRC; however, they may provide information to help to consider provisions that support certain outcomes and how these may be operationalised. For example, children identify emotional support and resultant feelings (e.g. of safety), and also of things they do not want (e.g. to be shouted at). Notably, there have been examples of provisions to support children's feelings of well-being such as in the UK Government "Every Child Matters" (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), which identified children's 'enjoyment and achievement' as a key outcome area.

Whilst children's feelings are not the same as children's rights, when children's perception is that their rights are not realised, decreased well-being may occur. In the case of the child's quote from Hareket and Yel (2017: 347) ('As children, we have the right to play comfortably and as much as we want. We can be happy only this way. All the children have the right to be happy and cheerful'), this thought-provoking interpretation is that of a child, which is explicitly what this review has investigated. By carrying out an open exploration of

children's views and concepts about their rights at a broad level, identification of what happens for children, what may be done to prevent violations of rights, and what helps to support realisation of rights can take place, supporting adult understanding of the purpose and scope of children's rights, and the associated legal frameworks.

The UNCRC details a rights framework across 54 Articles (UN, 1989) which may be difficult for younger children to internalise; a clearer focus on the four guiding UNCRC "principles" may promote communication and embedding. At the same time, it is acknowledged that the four identified principles may themselves be relatively thinly conceptualised and not well integrated within the broader framework of the UNCRC and Hanson and Lundy (2017) propose instead a more meaningful and effective development of a set of cross-cutting standards. Nonetheless, reduced specificity within the children's rights framework may serve to make "space" for children's views and concepts to be more readily captured, integrated and built upon (cf. Lundy, 2007).

This review found that national/cultural factors, social context, age, gender, relationships and school climate may impact on how children view their rights (cf. also Taylor *et al.*, 2001). There were mixed findings, in relation to gender, with some identification of females being generally more supportive of children's rights (Khoury-Kassabri and Ben-Arieh, 2009), although significant gender differences were not found in all the studies; see for example, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017).

4.2 *Implications for Theory and Understanding*

Figure 3 incorporates the findings presented following hybrid aggregative-configurative synthesis of the papers included in the present review and develops these into a progression of rights realisation. Quennerstedt and Moody (2020) identified that research has not tended to focus on how children may develop into rights bearers, or on which processes may support children in this development. Through synthesis of research utilising children's views, this way to consider a pathway to rights realisation sets out the need for the existence of children's rights for children, in their lives and experiences as well as set out in the UNCRC. It may be helpful to consider this as a foundation for progression of children's rights, towards full protection, promotion and provision. This requires adults (and other children) to be able to know and support children's rights. Alongside this, children need to be safe, and to feel safe, to share their views.

Children want and need to know about their rights; this may be direct or indirect at an early stage, and dialogue and shared language facilitates this process and the following stages, as they identify as rights holders and increase in

FIGURE 3 A progressions to children's rights realisation

their levels of knowledge, understanding, experience and participation. This may enable and empower children to utilise and uphold their rights and then potentially to be able to communicate, shape, develop and build on children's rights and their provision, protection and promotion. In turn, this may then support further embedding of a strong rights foundation.

4.3 *Implications for Practice*

As recognised by many children, in order to build the foundation needed for children's rights to be realised, adults need to know about and uphold them. af Ursin and Haanpää (2018: 439) describe children's participation as 'meaningless' if adults do not hear and respect their views. Programmes taking a child rights-based approach (CRBA) focus on developing capacities of adults and children (Munongi and Pillay, 2018), Unicef UK has partnered with local government with the aim of embedding a CRBA into public services (UNICEF, 2014) and professional training and awareness campaigns established in many countries by children's rights organisations have supported ongoing promotion of the UNCRC (Lee and Krappman 2020). This is relevant to support a range of professionals working with children, e.g. teachers, social workers and school nurses, in order to implement children's rights with increased knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC and also children's views, such as of the

importance of supportive adult relationships. Programmes such as the UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) could increase their emphasis on reaching out to other, as yet non-awarded, schools in order to develop capacity through training, access to parents and community and outreach work with CYP. Increased emphasis at a statutory level may also be a way in which to create a catalyst for adult action and development in this area.

The increased focus on and drive towards greater participation of children in research and in practice has already been identified; further development of this is important, to adhere to the UNCRC and its principles, and to continue to increase understanding of how children view children's rights and empower children to be able to influence and progress children's rights at a general level.

It may be helpful to identify and develop new ways to focus on rights if current ways do not align with children's views. For example, some rights are identified by children with a greater frequency than others, and some previous research has used Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) as a way to classify rights; see for example Huus *et al.* (2015). If children do not view rights as all being equal, it is important to find out when and why this may be and what happens to children's views about this as realisation of their rights progresses. It is also through participation and progression through the levels identified in Figure 3 (above) that rights identified by children which are outside the framework of the UNCRC can be understood and responded to.

The negative impact of psychosocial functioning when some rights are compromised (Magelhaus, 2018) suggests that working to support the upholding of rights may play an important role in meeting needs, supporting social, emotional and mental health and acting as a protective benefit. Educational psychologists are well-placed to support schools and families through provision of information about children's rights and supporting schools to provide, promote and protect these, and to gain the views of pupils better to understand how this may be of maximum utility in order to lead to rights realisation.

4.4 *Implications for Future Research*

Following a rigorous and comprehensive process and framework for critical appraisal, seven of the nine included studies were rated as having high methodological quality, with the other two being medium and low respectively. As such, research in this area is generally strong, albeit there is a somewhat unco-ordinated variety of foci and contexts, and not much evidence of a programme of research relating to the focus of this review. Future research could help to embed a more consistent approach in investigating not only specific provisions of the UNCRC, but also children's views on rights more generally.

If this happened with greater frequency, it may be easier to see patterns and differences whilst also acknowledging the importance of social context.

The importance of reviewing what research informs us about children's views of children's rights is identified, and it would be useful to develop understanding of the identified themes; for example, whether it is helpful to introduce children's rights to children and adults who are unfamiliar with them through a focus on the four guiding principles to support awareness and understanding.

Further research may also support the development of participation, as it is through further investigating the views of children, and continuing to access views at a general level, that greater understanding will be gained. For example, how do children find it most useful and relevant to view their rights, and how may this change as progression is made towards rights realisation. This could include using a longitudinal approach, including what happens following input and exposure to a rights-respecting environment and how development may be sustained and transferred to new contexts. The model of progression identified in this review suggests that as children move towards rights realisation, they may become more able to impact positively on the rights of others and on children's rights more generally.

4.5 *Limitations*

In the interests of accessibility to professional practice and policy makers/influencers, the researchers adopted a critical realist approach in conceptualising and structuring this review, which privileged comprehensive empirical reports of primary research demonstrating adherence to a comprehensive range of quality criteria (Fletcher, 2017; Gough and Thomas, 2017). It is acknowledged that a more interpretive approach to conceptualising and structuring the review (e.g. a meta-narrative synthesis) might have led to the inclusion of other studies integrating primary and/or secondary data in conjunction with relevant rigorous argumentation (Greenhalgh *et al.*, 2005).

Furthermore, within the terms of this review, other limitations should be considered. Though clear inclusion criteria were used, the nuanced nature of identifying papers is acknowledged. Furthermore, the search terms contain possible omissions such as using "young people" but not "young person". Whilst the authors decided not to include terms such as "participation" and "voice" based on earlier scoping exercises, it is acknowledged that this may have resulted in some research relevant to the current review being missed, and also that the included studies mainly gathered research in school contexts.

The process of analysing and synthesising the data was primarily led by the first author and it is recognised that, as a hybrid aggregative-configurative

synthesis, albeit with reference to the UNCRC as a framework, this may necessarily incorporate a degree of subjectivity or “bias”. The authors have endeavoured to be clear in the presentation and discussion of findings that the interpretations presented are those of the authors, allowing and indeed welcoming other readers the opportunity to consider alternative interpretations and thereby advance debate.

This research aimed to access children's views about their thinking about rights at a “meta” level. However, this perhaps necessarily increases the likelihood that children's interpretations of what they were asked about was different, depending on context, experience, and the framework and methods used, which varied across the included studies. The papers selected provide a snapshot of some children's views over the last ten years and the resulting synthesis presents a broad picture over a variety of contexts. Whilst variation by context is acknowledged, it is also relevant and useful to note the consistency and strong thread of many identified themes.

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