

## **Taking the Voices of Children and Young People Seriously: Best Practice Lessons for Research and Policy-Making Hong Kong**

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The normative framework of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) enshrines opportunities for children to express their life experiences and share their views on growing up in different social environments. Subsequently, international research programmes have collected information about trends in multidimensional well-being and, particularly, the perspectives of children and young people on their own lives. These various research programmes have resulted in significant progress in our understanding of the state and appropriate measures for the well-being of our future generations. It has become commonplace for governments around the world to unequivocally stress the need to hear the voices of children and young people as part of critical endeavours to design effective and forward-looking public policies.

In a recent Knowledge Transfer Project funded by Lingnan University, we conducted a systematic review of the literature across the Social Sciences to explore the key promises, but also the potential risks, limitations, and ethical issues regarding the inclusion of children and young people in the policy-related research process.

According to this literature, including children and young people into research and policymaking process has the potential to promote their rights, knowledge, capabilities, and empowerment. At the most basic level, it also boosts their role as individuals capable of offering exclusive insights on their daily lives. As such, authors emphasised the value of children and young people's role as social actors that have the knowledge and competence to comprehend complex issues that matter to them. Some researchers included children and young people to actively enhance their expertise in communication, planning, and critical analysis. Particularly research with vulnerable children and young people has been argued to have the potential to improve their empowerment, thus shining light and hopefully reducing existing discrimination, marginalisation, and inequality. In summary, involving children and young people more directly in research and policymaking can rescue them from silence and exclusion, and from being represented, by default, as passive objects. Not least, it promotes the common viewpoint that children and young people are the real experts on childhood and adolescence.

Yet, at the same time, the literature highlights many potential risks and limitations during the research process involving children. These risks may re-produce, rather than alleviate, existing power relations between adults and research respondents. For example, when researching children and young people, there may be ethical concerns such as adults exploiting children's relationships and networks to obtain data for their own rather than the children's interests. Several studies have shown that children and young people may be exposed to distressing information and feel pressured by adult researchers due to their age

status. Especially younger children may not be able to fully grasp the issues relating to confidentiality and disclosures as explained by the adult researcher. Research settings in schools can negatively influence children's capacity to participate freely. A teacher's introduction to the research goals or handing out questionnaires may be seen by children and young people as order and imposition, rather than an exercise to elicit their voice. Even outside of the school context, while striving to promote children's voluntarily participation, it may be difficult for children and young people to dissent to adult authorities for fear of causing offence or inconvenience. It is for the above reasons that governmental bodies are usually extremely concerned about managing the potential risks of involving children and young people in research and which often restricts the type of research they are willing to fund.

Best practice suggestions in the literature are legion, but require careful consideration, additional resources and, therefore, careful prior planning to be implemented effectively. For instance, it has been argued that researchers should employ a 'child-centric' approach in which they acknowledge that communication difficulties are their responsibility to solve, while always being responsive to the children and young people's demands and safety. Researchers have a duty, in this perspective, to take the extra time to explain clearly to children and young people about situations where confidentiality is likely to be compromised and ensure that they are well informed of options to consent to or reject invitations to participate and to withdraw from or continue in the research at any time they choose to. One common approach to providing more power to children and young people during the research process is to allow them to select the interview space, date, and time. To make children and young people feel more comfortable, they should not be interviewed alone, but rather in pairs or groups. Some research has shown that allowing older adolescents to act as interviewers or moderators during data collection periods may lower the notion of adults-as-authority. Crucially, adult researchers must always ensure that the children and young people are the only 'meaning-makers', i.e. that it is them that can give meaning to their voice rather than the adult researcher making assumptions during the data analysis stage. In many cases, this requires adult researchers to use a great deal of creativity to develop research tools and practices, which appeal to children and young people.

There is much applied-policy value in 'hearing the voices' of children, and policymakers have much to gain by recognising children and young people as active participants, social actors, and a legitimate source for knowledge production. However, data should always be collected according to the highest agreed standards that ensure the validity and reliability, but also the ethical integrity of child-derived data. In Hong Kong, as is the case elsewhere, successful implementation of these best practice lessons will determine the knowledge transfer potential of any research involving children and young people, and, therefore, the adequacy of public policies that are based upon such child-derived data.