
International Journal of Student Voice

A peer-reviewed, independent, open-access journal

Pennsylvania State University

Volume 6, Number 3

IJSV

2021

Adolescents' Understanding of Their Rights and Experiences of Autonomy

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Citation: McCluskey, E. & O'Neill, J. (2021). Adolescents' Understanding of Their Rights and Experiences of Autonomy. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 6 (3). <https://sites.psu.edu/ijsv/volume-6/>

Abstract: Article 42 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children's rights must be widely known by children and adults alike. Research on children's rights has found that children and adolescents often have limited or incorrect knowledge and understandings of rights and how they apply to their everyday lives. Despite New Zealand ratifying the convention in 1993 it appears that children may continue to have little knowledge about rights. This research explored adolescents' knowledge and understanding of their rights and UNCRC, where their knowledge and understanding come from, and how student experiences of autonomy may influence these understandings. Semi-structured interviews were used with 10 secondary (high) school students aged 14-15. Thematic analysis revealed that students may still hold limited and varied knowledge and understanding of their rights, and sources of this knowledge include inconsistent education at school, and television. It was also found that rights may not be a common discourse among adolescents. Teacher and government responsiveness towards adolescent students, and choices offered to them appeared to have an impact on student experiences of autonomy. These findings could have important

implications for government policy and legislation, and rights education within New Zealand schools.

Keywords: adolescents, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, understandings, autonomy

Introduction Children's rights are promoted within New Zealand law and public policy. However, children do not necessarily know they have rights or may have inconsistent or incorrect knowledge of their rights. Yet, to exercise rights, individuals must know that they have them. UNCRC recognises the rights of children and adolescents aged from birth to eighteen years old (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). UNCRC is a core human rights document and is the most universally ratified human rights treaty (UNICEF, 2020). The 42 articles in the treaty describe the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children and outline what every child needs for a safe and happy childhood. UNCRC rights address four general principles: survival, development, protection, and participation (UNICEF, 2020). Survival rights relate to living standards; development rights relate to healthy mental, social, physical, and spiritual development; protection rights provide protection from abuse and neglect, torture, and exploitation; participation rights relate to participation, having a say, and being involved in society (UNICEF, 2020).

While New Zealand has adopted the principles of UNCRC into law through ratification in 1993 and has agreed to respect, support, and promote the rights of children, the UNCRC rights themselves have not yet been adopted into New Zealand domestic law (Children's Convention Monitoring Group, 2018). UNCRC Article 42 states that governments must ensure the convention is widely known by children and adults (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Every five years the New Zealand government must report to the United Nations and demonstrate they are ensuring children's rights are advocated for and supported (UNICEF, 2020).

An important participation right within UNCRC is Article 12, which refers to children expressing their views and for these to be considered in any matter and decision that relates to the child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Consequently, this study explored students' knowledge and understandings of children's rights and where their knowledge and understanding come from. Limited research about children's knowledge and understanding of rights has been conducted since 1993 in New Zealand despite the evidence which suggests that knowledge of rights can support learning and development in children and adolescents (Covell, 2010) and, moreover, that autonomy

supportive learning environments can build understanding of rights and how they can be enacted (To et al., 2017).

Are Children and Adolescents Aware of their Rights and UNCRC?

Most children do not know they have rights, even in adolescence. Alderson (2000) surveyed 2,272 British and Northern Ireland students aged 7-17 years and found that only five percent of students stated that they had heard about UNCRC 'a lot', and 19% 'a bit'. The remaining 76% of the participants had not heard about UNCRC. Gwirayi and Shumba (2011) interviewed secondary school students in Zimbabwe, and examined children's awareness of their rights and UNCRC, and knowledge of various organisations that advocate for children's rights. Many young people were not aware of UNCRC or of their rights. Youth also lacked awareness of advocacy organisations. The right to education was the most frequently mentioned. Many participants lacked awareness of other UNCRC rights.

A similar picture emerges in New Zealand. Research conducted by Gilbert (1998) explored what New Zealand children knew about their rights and UNCRC. She found that 23% of children had heard of UNCRC. In another study, Taylor et al. (2001) surveyed 821 New Zealand students and found that 15% of students had heard of UNCRC, 63% of students said that they had not heard of UNCRC, and 22% were 'not sure'. More recent research by Save the Children New Zealand and UNICEF New Zealand reported comparable findings. These organisations ran workshops with 1,198 young people aged from 15-20 years from schools across New Zealand. Many adolescents had some knowledge about human rights in general and were able to name some of these rights but had limited knowledge of UNCRC and specific child rights (Riak et al., 2016). The report also states that 62% of children had knowledge of some rights, which mainly related to human rights. The remaining 38% were unable to answer or did not know any children's rights. Being aware of and knowing about rights is essential to being able to claim and respect rights (Alderson, 2008). If children are aware that they have rights in their everyday lives, they can discuss and enact them, and also advocate for the rights of their peers.

Children and Adolescents' Understanding of their Rights

Article 42 states that governments are obligated to ensure that children and adults know about the principles and provisions of the convention. However, even if children know about UNCRC, they may not necessarily understand the convention, their rights, and how these relate to their lives. Understanding why children have rights and the responsibilities one has as a right holder is a more psychologically complex idea. Understanding requires connecting experiences,

observations, fusing new and previously learned knowledge together, and involves having opportunities to test current thinking (Bereiter, 2005).

Research exploring children and adolescent understandings of human rights is inconsistent. Melton (1980) interviewed American children of different ages (6 - 13 years old). Melton found children's knowledge of their rights coincided with their age and that as age increased, children's understanding of their rights increased. For example, younger children associated rights with being given by authority, whereas older children could explain that rights were entitlements. Some older children discussed fairness, self-determination and advocating for rights of other children, indicating that older children can have the capacity to know and understand their rights. Children from a higher socioeconomic environment had more positive views towards children's rights compared to those in lower socioeconomic conditions. Melton suggested this may be due to children from a higher socioeconomic status having greater opportunities to have their rights upheld.

Ruck et al. (1998) explored Canadian children's perspectives and understandings of their rights by interviewing 169 children aged 8-16 about rights and then presented a real world hypothetical story about a child who wants to exercise a right against the wants of an authority figure. The authors found that some older adolescents linked rights to concrete rather than abstract thinking around rights, for example, connecting the notion of having rights with something given by authority. This was not consistent with Melton's finding that understanding of rights progresses with age. Ruck et al. (1998) also concluded from their research that children's understanding of rights in general influences their knowledge and understanding of their own rights in real world situations. This appears to suggest that it may not be age, but rather the maturity and capability of youth that assists with knowing and understanding children's rights.

Alongside capability, maturity, and knowledge of general human rights, other factors may influence children's understanding of their rights. Ben-Arieh and Khoury-Kassabri (2008) found nationality and ethnicity appeared to play a role in explaining differences in early adolescent understanding of rights. Differences in the importance placed on various rights by students and teachers may also impact on the way children and youth make sense of rights. In one study, New Zealand secondary school students placed importance on participation rights, while teachers placed importance on children's provisional and protection rights (Taylor et al., 2001). Rizzini and Thapliyal (2007) also found a disconnect between adults and youth understanding of rights and suggested that rights need to be promoted in ways that relate to the contexts of children.

Children have reported they would like more education on UNCRC and their rights and suggested this could be achieved through school or television (Gilbert, 1998). Youth also seem aware of why having knowledge of rights can benefit them in their lives. Children and adolescents that do know about UNCRC and rights stated that they think all children should know about UNCRC and the rights that they hold so they can defend and protect themselves (Akengin, 2008).

Research also indicates other factors may influence children's awareness of their rights. Phillips (2016) suggests that adults can have knowledge around how to access UNCRC and other information around rights whereas this may be less clear for children. Schools may also not be doing enough to support children in their knowledge and understanding of their rights. Taylor et al. (2001) suggest that schools could be more proactive with rights education.

Culture may also influence children's knowledge of UNCRC and their rights. A criticism of UNCRC is that it assumes Western worldviews and individual rights as the norm (Hayes & Bradley, 2009), which may contribute towards a child's limited awareness of their rights under UNCRC. Not all countries that have ratified the convention have an exclusively individualistic culture, for example, a collectivist culture also exists in New Zealand (Podsiadlowski & Fox, 2011). Therefore, it is flawed to assume that a rights framework underpinned by individualistic thinking is also appropriate for children from collectivist cultures. This may then be reflected in research showing children may not be aware of, or understand their rights outlined in UNCRC because these children may not connect to them.

Rights Education and Autonomy in Adolescence

Rights education teaches students they are important right-holders and citizens within society and teaching them about their specific rights as a child and human (Covell et al., 2010). One approach to rights education that appears to have had a positive impact in Canada is the Rights, Respect and Responsibility (RRR) initiative. Covell and Howe (2008) introduced the RRR initiative as a rights education framework in 2003. This initiative taught children their rights under UNCRC, ensured their rights are respected at school, rights were integrated into school policies, and schools prioritised opportunities for children to participate in decisions and activities that affected their schooling. Schools that adopted RRR reported greater student engagement, participation at school, enjoyment of school, rights respecting behaviours, and supportive relationships and school environments. Compared to schools where RRR was not as well implemented, these children also appeared to show an increased understanding of rights and how they relate to their lives and were able to distinguish them from related concepts such as responsibilities (Covell & Howe, 2008).

Furthermore, in research by Covell et al. (2011), schools that implemented RRR could be better placed to mitigate potential negative effects in children with social disadvantages. These students appeared to show higher school engagement, increased optimism, and self-concept, and decreased social issues such as bullying. Covell also used the Young Students' Engagement in School Scale to examine student's self-reported levels of school engagement. Covell (2010) found that students from schools who implemented the RRR initiative, compared to schools that have not implemented this initiative, reported increased school engagement, for example, participation.

Knowledge of rights has also been linked to increased wellbeing. Casas et al. (2018) explored the relationship between knowledge of rights and subjective wellbeing. They surveyed children aged eight, 10 and 12 years old from 18 different countries and found children who indicated they knew about their rights reported higher subjective wellbeing than children who did not know about their rights. Casas et al. (2018) also reported a positive relationship between the perceptions of adults' attitudes towards children's rights and knowledge that children had about their rights. Furthermore, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2017) found a positive relationship between children having knowledge of their rights and wellbeing.

Comprehensive rights education can empower students and support their developing self-determination and autonomy, especially in schools that both teach and model children's rights. To et al. (2017) explored attitudes towards self-determination and nurturance rights in adolescents in China. They used self-report questionnaires to examine the impact of school and familial environments, for example if autonomy was supported, on children's endorsements of their own rights. They found environments with higher maternal responsiveness, teacher and maternal autonomy support, and a democratic climate (e.g., involvement in decision making), correlated with children reporting higher levels of support for nurturance and self-determination rights. These environments were associated with psychological benefits and supporting awareness of their own rights. It appears that supporting autonomy supports rights education and vice versa. Autonomy support in both home and school environments appears to be a tool that can assist with the development of awareness, knowledge and understanding of rights for adolescents.

Autonomy Supportive Teaching

Autonomy supportive teaching encourages students and teachers to work together as equals. Reeve (2009) suggests that there are three important aspects of successful autonomy supportive teaching: Acknowledge and embrace the perspectives of students; encourage and seek the thoughts, feelings and

behaviours of students; and support the development of motivation and self-regulation. Cheon et al. (2020) examined the effect of autonomy supportive classroom structures on student learning and motivation. They randomly assigned physical education teachers to either use autonomy supporting teaching styles or continue with their regular teaching. It was found that students receiving autonomy supportive teaching reported higher classroom engagement and learning. Therefore, teachers can have an important role in creating environments and conditions where students can learn and practice autonomy and self-determination.

Offering choice appears to be an important factor in creating autonomy supportive environments. Evans and Boucher (2015) found by providing meaningful choices for students, teachers can support the development of autonomy, motivation, and engagement at school. Teachers, schools, family/whānau and environments that support autonomy appear to foster positive student learning and development, school engagement and several wellbeing benefits for children. Autonomy is also an important component of adolescent development. Children's rights education supports children's development by supporting self-determination and autonomy. Self-determination refers to the intrinsic motivation behind the process of controlling and making decisions about one's life (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Students need opportunities to be competent, autonomous and show self-determination. These dispositions are extremely important for social and emotional development in adolescence as youth navigate their identities, personalities, values, and morals (Santrock, 2012).

Article 42 of UNCRC can also be thought of as a partnership between the government, youth, and adults in children's lives as governments actively work to ensure that the convention is widely known, and that children's rights are being upheld. If children and adults have little to no knowledge of UNCRC and the rights of children, it raises the concern that the partnership between children, adults and the government may be weakened.

Study Design

This study adopted a broadly phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of students with regard to rights and autonomy, and how they make sense of these experiences (Teherani et al., 2015). The study employed a semistructured interview using a guide based on Adams (2015). The interview protocol focused on the participants' knowledge and understanding of children's rights, including UNCRC, where this understanding originated from, and the influence of student experiences of autonomy on these understandings (Figure 1). Interview questions were open-ended and used follow up probes if required.

- What is your favourite thing about school?
- Do you feel like you are listened to in your class? Tell me about a time you were listened to?
- Do you feel like you can make decisions about your learning at school and at home? Tell me about a time where you felt like you could or could not make a decision about your learning?
- Do you feel you have control over your life and the way you want it to go?
- Do you think your teacher/government/family cares about what you think? Do you think they support you making decisions about your own life?
- What do you think a right is?
- Have you ever heard of UNCRC the Convention on the Rights of a Child?
- What different types of rights do you know about?
- Tell me about a time where you learned about rights or you heard about rights?
- How confident do you feel in talking about rights with your friends, teachers, and family?
- Do you and your friends think that the government in New Zealand is doing enough to ensure that adults such as parents and teachers have a good understanding of children's rights?
- (If applicable) Do you think that learning about your rights has helped you make decisions about your life?
- Do you have the freedom to do what you value?
- Describe your school to me like you would to someone of your age who might be thinking of enrolling there?
- What year are you in? How old are you?

Figure 1. Interview protocol

Ten secondary school students participated in this study, six female and four male, with an age range of 14-15, who were in Year 9 or 10 in secondary school. Nine students identified as New Zealand European, and one student identified as Australian/New Zealander. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participant's home or through video chat. Participants could choose to have their parent or caregiver present for the interview. Interviews were recorded. Semistructured interviews with open ended questions allowed for building rapport, flexibility, gathering information about lived experience and thoughts, and provided a confidential and safe space (Adams, 2015). Interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Data analysis utilised a five-phase thematic analysis similar to Braun and Clarke (2006).

Knowledge and Understanding of Rights and UNCRC

Most participants commented that rights are universal and that every human is entitled to them, “Something that doesn’t have to be earned, it’s just like there in place that every human has, and we should just respect it no matter what”. While most participants discussed issues of entitlement and universality, some also talked about laws and morals, and legal ages as part of their knowledge of rights. Both specific and general rights were mentioned. Freedom of speech, to be listened to, privacy, education, safety, needs (specific rights) and human rights, legal rights, and consumer rights (general rights) were discussed. A few talked about general rights such as “legal rights, consumers rights, people’s rights”. More than half talked about specific rights, including human needs, right to education, safety, and freedom of speech, for example, “I guess like getting food and water... maybe like going to school”.

Knowledge of rights came largely from school and from television. Over half the students specifically mentioned learning about rights in their classes at high school, several of these from a social studies module on human rights. One student learned about human rights through Amnesty International group at school and two from previous learning at primary school. Three students identified television, especially the news: “I guess a lot of my learning about rights comes from tv and you hear about freedom of speech or you watch the news, and you hear about that you have the right to do something”. Another two said they had not learned about rights at school.

Three participants said they felt confident in talking about rights, but it was not a topic that comes up in conversation. As one student explained, they were not confident because they did not know much about rights:

Not very confident, like if I had to explain to someone or if it was a test of name all the rights that you have I wouldn’t be able to do that, I wouldn’t be able to tell you the rights that I could do, I’m not very clear on it.

Four students suggested that government could be doing more because “no one talks about children’s rights specifically” and that there is “no clear stuff about children’s rights”. Two students suggested that the government was doing enough to make sure that UNCRC is widely known. One student suggested teachers know about some children’s rights but not about others. One placed the responsibility for learning about rights on the general population: “Yes, it’s whether or not the people actually listen, you still have child abuse or abuse in general going on and those are the people who just don’t give a crap about anyone else”.

Experience of Autonomy

Data came from questions around being listened to in class, making decisions about learning, having control over life, and having the freedom to do what you value. More than half the participants commented that some teachers listen and some do not. Students thought teachers listened when students were: included in conversations, able to decline to answer a question, given time to answer questions, given opportunities to ask questions, actively listened to in their questions:

I particularly like my English teacher; she is just really open and caring and she listens to the answers that I give in class and she can give really good feedback.

Participants who did not feel listened to mentioned: not being given attention, teachers not understanding what the student is asking or saying, and not asking questions because they did not want to appear wrong:

My food and nutrition teacher listens to my questions, she gives me enough time to ask, like other teachers don't really give time, they just want you to not have questions because if you don't they think you understand kind of thing. So, I don't really ask questions in that class, I just try to figure it out myself.

Most students observed that the amount of effort that teachers put into their teaching reflects their ability to care and listen to their students.

A majority of participants felt that government does not listen or care about what they think. Two students believed that there is no opportunity to have a say until they are legally allowed to vote, "I don't really get a say in government issues. It's 18 and then you can start making a change". Half explained that they would feel confident in talking about rights with friends and family but not with teachers because they felt like they might be wrong, or that teachers have expectations that students should know more than they do.

In terms of freedom to make decisions, half the students shared stories about being able to pick a subject they enjoyed, and two experiences of not being able to pick a subject. Most students stated that they felt they had control over their lives and the way they want it to go, and two were unsure. Six participants indicated that parents or school affect the their feeling of control over their life. One participant stated that he felt as though he did not have control over his life as there was family pressure, "No, 'cause Mum wants me to go to uni... I'm still thinking". Another was affirmed by parental support, "I think I have control over

my life, my family supports me in what I want to do... they listen to my ideas and tell me that I can study what I want". Some participants referenced school influences on their decision-making, for example, "Academically I can choose whether to participate, and I can put in the hard work... but I can also choose to not put hard work in and deal with the consequences".

Eight of the ten participants said that knowing about rights influenced their decision making around minor decisions in their lives, for example, going to the bathroom:

Not major decisions but minor ones, like, for example, when I ask to use the bathroom and the teacher says no and I really have to go, they can't really tell me I'm not allowed to cause it's a right to use the bathroom.

Other minor decision making included not associating with someone who had infringed their rights, "I know that I have a right to be treated well and if that's broken then I might make a decision to not be around that person...". Two participants spoke about their awareness of other people having rights which informed their own decision making, "It makes you respect others more, knowing that they have a right as well". Another student explained that rights guide her by knowing she has a voice and freedom. In contrast, two students stated that knowing about rights had not helped them make decisions about their lives.

Discussion

While participants seemed to have limited knowledge and understanding of UNCRC, they demonstrated the capacity to link rights to being human and to the law. This suggests that even though young people may not be able to explicitly define rights, they may still have some implicit understanding of rights. Early adolescents in the research by Melton (1980) were able to link their knowledge and understanding of rights to being an entitlement. In this study, entitlement was a common word used to convey understanding of a right. Melton (1980) also indicated that knowledge of rights may coincide with age of the child. In this study, some students held the view of rights being universal and an entitlement, others linked their knowledge of rights to laws and legal ages (e.g., driving a car, purchasing alcohol).

Participants stated they learned about rights at school, however, where they learned about rights differed (e.g., tourism or social studies subjects). This appears to show there is no comprehensive rights education in high school for year nine and ten students even though the New Zealand Curriculum includes learning about human rights within the social sciences subject (Ministry of

Education, 2015). A key part of the success from the RRR initiative has been consistent education around specific rights of children and embedding this within school policy where children can have input (Covell & Howe, 2008). It appears that teaching specific children's rights and UNCRC may not be happening in the first two years of secondary school. There is also the possibility that rights are being taught in abstract ways that do not provide opportunities for students to negotiate and enact them. This may, in part, account for why some students have only an implicit understanding of rights.

These findings appear consistent with Taylor et al. (2001) who suggested that schools should be more proactive in educating students about UNCRC, and with the recommendation by Riak et al. (2016) that government must take the lead in fulfilling their responsibilities under Article 42 by incorporating rights education in school curriculum more effectively.

Many students said their learning about rights had come from television. Participants talked about seeing a particular situation where rights were or were not upheld. Other participants talked about legal rights (e.g., Miranda rights). This may be concerning because television and other technologies can portray incorrect information (Allen et al., 2020), which could misleadingly influence children's understanding and knowledge of rights. However, technology can also be a significant resource for learning (Chauhan, 2017), therefore these results could indicate that television is an effective way for children to learn about rights. This appears consistent with Gilbert (1998) who found that children wanted more information on UNCRC which could be achieved through television.

Participants indicated that rights are not a common discourse; they do not talk about them with friends or information was not readily available. Again, this could be concerning and may help explain why adolescents seem to have limited and inconsistent knowledge around children's rights and UNCRC. If children's rights are not a common discourse, then it can create difficulties for young people to know and exercise their rights. Some participants in this study struggled to connect their knowledge and understanding of rights to decision making about their lives. Furthermore, participants indicated that they do not feel confident in talking about rights with teachers. This finding is consistent with Riak et al. (2016) who recommended that UNCRC should be discussed more frequently and openly to embed it within New Zealand culture.

Children's rights not being a common discourse could relate to a disconnect between adult and youth understanding of rights, and these current findings appear consistent with previous research. Taylor et al. (2001) found that teachers placed importance on children's protection and provisional rights, while students placed importance on participation rights. Rizzini and Thapliyal (2007) suggested

there is an incongruence between adult and youth understanding of rights. Differences in the perceived importance of particular rights may contribute to children's rights not being a common discourse.

Teacher and government responsiveness appeared to influence students' experiences of autonomy. Participants thought the government does not listen to what they have to say. Participants also highlighted the lack of opportunity to voice their opinion. Some indicated this cannot occur until voting age. Participants also held the view that government cares about schools but not individuals. This appears to indicate that youth want the government to listen, which is not a new concept. A key finding from the *Mai World Child and Youth Voices Report* (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2017) was that youth wanted a say in issues important to them and indicated interest in politicians visiting their school or communities. This report also highlighted youth perceptions around the inability to vote, thus not being able to have a say in their future. Having a say and listening to children's views in decisions that affect them is part of upholding Article 12 of UNCRC; governments must consider the views of children before making decisions that concern them. Participants in this study indicated limited opportunities to have a say in decisions that affect them.

Government responsiveness to youth and New Zealand as a whole could potentially encourage an autonomy supportive environment. Participants in this study thought the government was not doing enough to ensure that adults know about children's rights. This is concerning as it is the responsibility of adults to teach children about their rights (Liebel, 2012). There is limited information about the implementation of Article 42 in New Zealand's fifth periodic report demonstrating the implementation of UNCRC. This report states that information about UNCRC is readily available on Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Youth Development, Ministry of Justice, and the Office of the Children's Commissioner websites (United Nations, 2016). There appears to be limited knowledge and understanding of UNCRC among youth (and adults) because they may not know how to access this information or even know that it exists.

This research appears to indicate that technology could assist with implementing dissemination and raising awareness about UNCRC and the implementation of Article 42.

Teachers can have a profound effect on student experiences of autonomy. Acknowledging and embracing student perspectives is important in autonomy supportive teaching (Reeve, 2009). The present study appears to support this notion. Participants mentioned if their teacher demonstrated that they were caring then they felt like their teachers listened to what they had to say and think, which suggests this may influence their perception and experience of autonomy

environments. Teachers that show care towards their students, and what and how they teach can have a positive impact on how students perceive them, build rapport, and in turn can have a positive effect on student engagement at school and learning (Meyers, 2009). Participants in this study appeared to indicate that caring teachers were able to create experiences of autonomy where students felt listened to and given opportunities to make decisions.

Additionally, participants discussed not feeling confident enough to talk about rights with their teachers. This appeared to be related to not wanting to be judged or wrong. This could reflect differences between adult and child perceptions of rights which may inhibit experiences of autonomy where rights can become common discourse. This could then influence the perception of participants in the current study where they believe the government may not be doing enough to ensure that adults in their lives know about children's rights. Again, this brings up the idea of a weakened partnership between children, adults, and the government in terms of children's rights. Given that partnership is an integral part of Te Tiriti o Waitangi it could potentially raise concern.

While there appears limited opportunity for young people to have a say in things that affect them, there seems to be environments which support experiences of autonomy. Having the opportunity to choose subjects was indicated by participants to be a situation where they could make a decision that influenced their learning. When choice was impacted, it appeared distressing and frustrating. Providing choice to support autonomy and learning at school is not a new idea; Evans and Boucher (2015) suggest that providing meaningful choices for students supports the development of autonomy, motivation, and engagement of students at school.

The results also seem to indicate the knowledge that students have about their rights and UNCRC can support minor decision making. Freeman (2007) suggests that youth learning about children's rights assists with them developing the capacity to be agents and decision makers. In this study, participants could link their knowledge on rights to minor decision making, but not bigger decisions.

Conclusion

This purpose of this research was to explore adolescent students' knowledge and understanding of UNCRC and rights, where this knowledge came from, and how their perceptions and experiences of autonomy may influence knowledge and understanding. Previous research has investigated youth knowledge and understanding of human rights and found that many students hold inconsistent and incorrect knowledge of their rights. From previous research there also appears to be a positive link between autonomy supportive environments and

enhanced knowledge and understandings of children's rights and how these can be applied to everyday life, especially for adolescent development. There have been several years between previous research and this current study, and it appears students still have inconsistent knowledge of their rights. The qualitative data suggested that knowledge comes predominantly from school and technology (e.g., television). Results indicated that even in the school environment, the source of knowledge and understandings of rights differed between students.

Students indicated having an experience of autonomy support in their home and school learning environments. Participants also suggested that several factors may influence this environment. This can include teacher responsiveness especially if they show that they care, and through offering choices for students to have opportunities to make decisions about their learning. Confidence in talking about rights with teachers did not appear as high compared to talking about rights with peers or family, which was an unanticipated finding. Another finding that was unanticipated, but could have important implications for New Zealand government, education, and policy, is that New Zealand as a whole, could be an autonomy supportive environment. This may support children in having their say about decisions that affect them. The present study also appeared to highlight that there are limited opportunities for youth that are below voting age to voice their opinions to the government, which could be further explored in research or reviews. This study contributes to existing research in this area by providing further evidence of students holding inconsistent or limited knowledge and understanding of children's rights and highlighted how student experiences of autonomy can influence knowledge and understandings of children's rights. The findings from the present study supports growing evidence that New Zealand needs more robust and comprehensive ways to teach children about their rights under UNCRC.

This study has helped reveal important perspectives and experiences around child rights. An important experience revealed was students wanting to have a choice and say in what they do. This could inform ways in which children can be given additional authentic decision-making opportunities in their everyday lives in the classroom and school. Subsequently it may influence experiences of having autonomy and the way they want things to go in their life.

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