

**Children as Citizens? International Voices  
Childwatch International Citizenship Study Group  
Edited by Nicola Taylor and Anne Smith (2009)  
Dunedin: University of Otago Press**

*Reviewed by Emma Davies*

This book is based on research exploring the meaning of citizenship to children (8-9 years) and young people (14-15 years) from six countries. The research is framed within the paradigm of the sociology of childhood. This emerging tradition positions children with agency, as experts in their worlds. This frame has helped inspire researchers to conduct research with, rather than on, children and young people. This study firmly sits within this tradition and will be warmly welcomed by child advocates. Indeed, it has been conducted under the auspices of Childwatch International, a global, not-for-profit non-governmental network of institutions that conduct child-focused research in order to promote children's rights.

The researchers conducted one-off focus groups of male and female children (8-9) and young people (14-15) separately in New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Norway, Palestine and South Africa: 584 children and young people participated in total, with the numbers of children in each country varying between 51 in Norway and 181 in Palestine. They also surveyed 312 parents across Australia, Brazil, New Zealand and South Africa.

The result is a laudable attempt at a very ambitious project designed to capture children's and young people's perceptions of the complex concepts of rights and citizenship. The child and youth participants gave concrete examples to express their understanding of rights; examples that mirror the participation, protection and provision rights explicit in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Provision rights: "To have a say, choose friends, be respected, express opinions, be listened to, make choices, to say 'no', be involved in resolving conflict, choose one's own religion, participate in decisions and to have freedom of movement.

Protection rights: Protection from bullying by peers, safety at school, home and in the community, freedom from drugs and alcohol, freedom from discrimination and racism, protection from sexual abuse, violence and forced labour, and to be treated fairly.

Provision rights: Parental care and nurturance, education, sustenance (food, clothing and housing), healthy environments, recreation/play opportunities, medical care, transport, spaces to hang out, access to employment, access to resources (e.g. equipment at school).”

The younger children found the concepts of rights and citizenship harder than the young people. Making these concepts real with eight year olds across such a broad range of nations is no mean feat. I particularly liked the use of an imaginary country to enable children to explore citizenship in a way that is meaningful to them and sounds fun. The researchers could have perhaps enabled younger children’s insights more effectively if the groups could have met more than once.

I struggled with some of the overall conclusions because they seemed to state the obvious. For example: “The ways in which rights were implemented by and for children in their everyday lives varies both within and between cultures.” Yes, but whether conclusions like this warrant all the extraordinary effort that went into this study is another question. From my perspective, the study is most valuable as part of a growing bank of methods seeking to work with children, enabling their voices on their experiences of their worlds to be heard.

The authors set important challenges for adults who engage with children including parents, teachers and policy makers. These include identification of opportunities to facilitate authentic child participation; examining our own assumptions about the conceptualisation of childhood and being open to hearing what children and young people have to say, even when their comments are surprising or counter-intuitive to the adult facilitators. “The real implications may not necessarily lie with the way the children learn, so much as with the way that adults who work with them think about, and therefore engage with, children and young people.”

In the last twenty years or so, research, advocacy and policy making processes have encouraged more active engagement with young

people, although young children's engagement within this paradigm remains relatively rare, at least in New Zealand and Australia. Finding better ways to engage with children and young people on matters that affect them and ensuring that these voices are heard by those with decision-making power are important adult pursuits. This study goes some way towards developing methodologies the adult world needs to enable children's participation, protection and provision rights. With this in mind, I congratulate the researchers' contribution to this growing knowledge base.