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Research-Based Drama: A Method for Exploring Children's Rights Issues

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Abstract

This article showcases how drama can be used as a tool to examine children's rights issues and build greater awareness and understanding of these rights. The piece explores an activity in which university students created dramatic performances based on their research explorations of children's rights topics. I begin by sharing some background on Canada's commitments to children's rights education. Following this, I discuss the activity process and share photographs from some of the performances. The article concludes with thoughts on the importance of drama as a tool for supporting children's rights education.

Keywords

Children's rights, drama education, research-based drama, pedagogy, UNCRC, article 42

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This article showcases how drama can be used as a tool to examine children's rights issues and build greater awareness and understanding of these rights. The piece explores an activity in which university students created dramatic performances based on their research explorations of children's rights topics. I begin by sharing some background on Canada's commitments to children's rights education. Following this, I discuss the activity process and share photographs from some of the performances. The article concludes with thoughts on the importance of drama as a tool for supporting children's rights education. While the drama activity discussed in this article was used with university students, these methods can also be adapted for use with child and youth participants, in a range of contexts.

Background on Canada's Commitments to Children's Rights Education

In 1991, the Canadian government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), agreeing to uphold the rights outlined in the document. The UNCRC includes 54 articles that cover numerous aspects of children's lives ('children' in this context defined as being from birth to 18 years of age). These include rights to health, food, water, shelter, safety, privacy, participation, rest and leisure, education, and information (to name only a few).

Despite ratifying the UNCRC (legally obligating Canada to be bound by its terms), the government of Canada has not fulfilled all of its commitments under the convention. One of these unfulfilled commitments is Article 42: a promise that efforts will be made to ensure that adults and children across the country are aware of children's rights under the convention (UNCRC, 1989). While the government of Canada has included some information discussing children's rights on its 'National Child Day' webpage, little has been done to ensure children's rights education is implemented into provincial curricula and teacher education. As Di Santo and Robichaud (2025) suggest, without broader awareness and understanding of children's rights, and our country's commitment to these rights, "it is difficult for children and youth to advocate for their rights and for professionals to recognize and honour these rights" (p. 123).

While the Ontario curriculum at present does not *explicitly* specify how children's rights education can and should be integrated, discussions of some of these rights overlap with many existing curricular topics and subject areas. Although the UNCRC is not a perfect document, it is a starting point for recognizing children and youth as rights-holding individuals – people who should be protected from discrimination and harm;

supported in their health, survival, and growth; and have their needs and views considered in matters that affect them. As educators, researchers, and practitioners who work with children, one of the things we can do to bring more awareness of children's rights is integrate discussion of these rights into other subject areas using a variety of critical, experiential, and arts-based, tools. One such approach is discussed below.

Using Research-Based Drama to Explore Children's Rights

Before joining York University as a full-time faculty member in the Children, Childhood and Youth program, I taught at several different universities and in a variety of programs, teaching courses related to drama and arts education, language learning, research methods, literature and culture, and child and youth studies. In the following sections, I discuss an activity that I first facilitated for teacher candidates in an education course at a Canadian institution in 2018, and that I have since adapted for use in a range of different classes. Discussion of this activity is meant to provide an example of how teachers and educators might integrate children's rights education into their own teaching contexts. The activity can be adapted, built on, or altered to fit different age groups, course needs, or experiential and artistic practices.

Prior to the activity, I facilitated conversations about the UNCRC, and children's rights more broadly, with the teacher candidates. We discussed a variety of the rights presented as articles in the convention, including the teacher candidates' own experiences and understanding of these rights. They were then divided into groups, and each group of teacher candidates chose one of the rights, outlined in the UNCRC, to create their research-based performance piece about.

Over the next few classes, the teacher candidates worked in groups to compile research about their chosen rights, including local and international news stories, policy documents, research articles, and scholarly book chapters that related to their group's chosen right. Based on this research, the groups each developed a short performance piece highlighting local and global issues related to their chosen right, including examples of that right being either upheld or denied.

The teacher candidates in this particular course were encouraged to use tableaux and voiceover narration methods for their performances, in order to limit the need for line memorization in such a short timeframe, and to enable them to focus on the imagery and content. When adapting this activity for use in other courses (with different timelines and goals), I have encouraged students to explore other performance techniques as well. After the teacher candidates had finalized their performance pieces, the groups each presented their performances for the larger class and had opportunities to reflect on the ways that drama can aid in exploring such complex topics.



Figure 1: Student performance about Article 38 of the UNCRC (protections in armed conflicts)



Figure 2: Student performance about Article 27 of the UNCRC (adequate standard of living)



Figure 3: Student performance of Article 19 of the UNCRC (safety from violence, abuse, or neglect)



Figure 4: Student performance of Article 28 of the UNCRC (access to education)

Concluding Thoughts

The UNCRC is the most widely ratified international human rights convention in history; however, research indicates that much more work is needed to build awareness and

understanding of these rights, and of the responsibilities involved in upholding these rights (Covell et al., 2018; Quennerstedt, 2025).

This article presents an example of one way that educators can facilitate explorations of children's rights through drama. In this class, students had opportunities to conduct literature-based research, including both local and global issues as well as a range of different perspectives, to develop a thorough research-based performance piece. This form of dramatic exploration can support 'embodied cognition', a type of learning that helps students better understand, visualize, and make connections to course content. As Margaret Branscombe (2019) explains: "those who create the image and its meaning are fully immersed in the meaning which therefore increases their affective experience of information" (p. 37). In addition to learning through embodiment, students had opportunities to watch their peers' performances, learning from their peers' research in a way that may be considered more accessible, meaningful, and memorable than a traditional essay or class presentation.

While the drama-based activity discussed in this article was facilitated with a group of teacher candidates, there is a continued need to expand efforts and to facilitate more critical, artistic, and embodied explorations into children's rights with teachers, as well as with children and youth themselves. Some of this much-needed and important work is in the process of being conducted by graduate-level researchers, such as Jessica Campbell and Danielle Legerman at York University, who are leading projects that facilitate and explore young people's own understandings of their rights.

This article provides an example of a research-based drama activity which can be adapted, built on, or altered to support student explorations on a range of topics. It can be adjusted with different age groups, performance methods, and course needs in mind. Research-based drama has great potential for classroom explorations of complex topics including social and environmental issues, historical events, and scientific concepts. It can be a tool for both arts-focused educators as well as educators in other subject areas, who hope to support students' understanding and retention of subject matter through embodied learning.

Notes on Contributor

Abigail Shabtay, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Children, Childhood and Youth Studies program at York University. Dr. Shabtay's research and teaching focus on child- and youth-centered research practices, children's rights, and drama-based research. Dr. Shabtay is the Principal Investigator of multiple research projects focusing on children, youth, and the performing arts, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She has received several awards for excellence in research and teaching in her field.

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