Slide 1

Slide 2

Thank you for inviting me today. I regard it a great honour to have been invited to speak on children's rights in this country that is so visibly and authentically striving to translate international policy on children's rights into national policy and children's lived experiences. In particular, the work you have been doing and continue to do in giving the *YOUNGEST* children in Wales 'the rights start': that is a life where government policy that affects children's lives is predicated on children's rights. Thank you.

Slide 3

To begin, I must be clear that my perspective on Children's Rights is not as a lawyer - or as a child, or as part of the global ethnic majority. Rather, my perspective on Children's Rights is that of a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a teacher of teachers, a researcher, a white, middle class, Global North native, but nonetheless an advocate of rights for all children, a world citizen and a human being.

Although I work in a university nowadays, my initial training was as an early childhood teacher and for the first 20 years of my career, I worked as a teacher with children aged 18 months to thirteen years in many different contexts including schools, nurseries, children's own homes and music services.

Part-way though that time in my life, I had my own first child – a little girl. She was born in September 1989, two months before the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations, and the close sequence of those two huge events in my life – one global and one very personal – sparked my interest in children's rights and made me really stop to think about what I could – and should – do as a parent, a teacher, an advocate for children, a citizen and a human being to contribute to the realisation of children's rights.

And as my two boys were born and grew up, as I worked with more and more children, then as I moved into teacher education, as my children had children of their own and as I became a grandparent, gradually that interest grew to become an imperative that is both personal and professional. That imperative has been the driver for my research and publications, including my work on young children as researchers in matters affecting them which is ongoing, and

the Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights that I edited with Beth Blue Swadener and Kylie Smith, in which more than 70 authors highlighted positive progress and disappointing narratives on the rights of our youngest children across the World in 2019, marking the 30th anniversary of UNCRC's adoption.
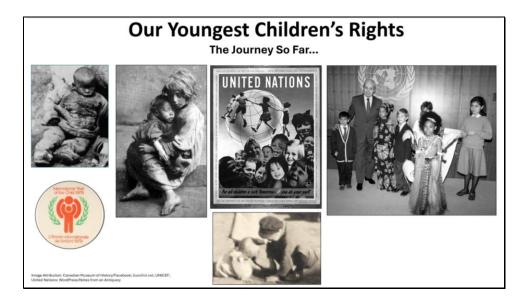
It is now 36 years since UNCRC was adopted, yet the promise of rights for ALL children - especially the youngest - to protection, provision and participation - remains unfulfilled. There is much work still for us all to do.
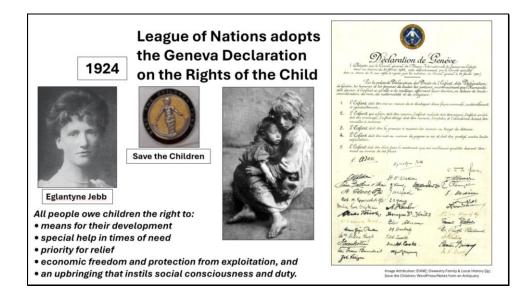
Slide 4

So… now you know my personal journey so far with Children's Rights.

Over the next 30 minutes, I now invite you to join with me on a journey together… a journey on which we reflect together briefly on the children's rights story so far, we consider some barriers that are preventing the realisation of our youngest children's rights currently, and we project forward to consider future possibilities that may enable our youngest children to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled.
In this short space of time, it is impossible to include everything that has happened, is happening and will happen, but I hope our whistlestop tour today will give us some space and time to think: 'What have I done, what am I doing, and what more can I do to contribute to the realisation of the youngest children's rights?'

Slide 5

So… to begin, let's make the **journey together back through time to reflect briefly on the children's rights story so far…**

To truly understand where we are now and where we could – and should - go in the future, first we must recognise where we have come from…

Children's rights policy is not a new thing, of course. It predates 1989's UNCRC by many years.

In the wake of the horrors of the first World War, the first children's rights policy was drafted by Eglantyne Jebb. a British woman who founded the Save the Children Fund.
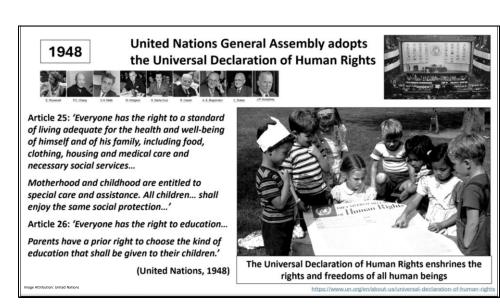
The Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child was adopted 101 years ago in 1924 by the League of Nations. The Declaration states that all people owe children the right to:
• means for their development;
• special help in times of need;
• priority for relief;
• economic freedom and protection from exploitation; and
• an upbringing that instils social consciousness and duty.

So, in the 1924 Declaration, we see children framed as vulnerable - in need of the right to 'protection from exploitation', requiring provision, or 'means for their development', special help in times of need', and 'priority for relief', and although participation rights come later, children's right to learn 'social consciousness and duty' during the period of childhood is articulated clearly even at this early stage in children's rights.

REF:
League of Nations (1924) *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child of 1924,* adopted Sept. 26, 1924, O.J. Spec. Supp. 21.

Slide 7

Then in 1948, former USA First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt led an international team of philosophers, educators, diplomats and lawyers to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris.

The UDHR enshrines the rights and freedoms of ALL human beings, including children. However, there are few explicit mentions of children in UDHR, and no article in UDHR focuses only on children.

Instead, children are positioned within the family, motherhood and parents, rather than being framed as competent social actors.
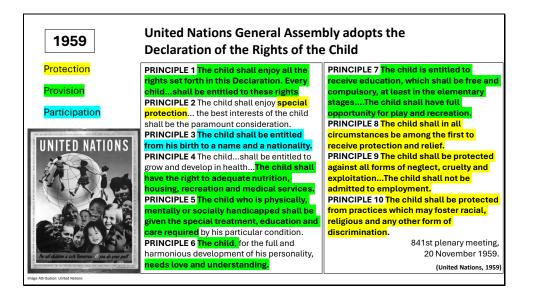
NOTES:
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been translated into over 500 languages. The UDHR is widely recognized as having inspired, and paved the way for, the adoption of more than seventy human rights treaties, applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels (all containing references to it in their preambles).

The United Nations General Assembly adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Palais de Chaillot in Paris, 10 December 1948. Photograph: STF/AFP/Getty Images

REF:
United Nations General Assembly. 1948. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).* New York: United Nations General Assembly.

Slide 8

1959

Protection

Provision

Participation

UNITED NATIONS

For all children a safe Tomorrow...if you do your part!

Image Attribution: United Nations

United Nations General Assembly adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child

PRINCIPLE 1 The child shall enjoy all the rights set forth in this Declaration. Every child...shall be entitled to these rights
PRINCIPLE 2 The child shall enjoy special protection... the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration.
PRINCIPLE 3 The child shall be entitled from his birth to a name and a nationality.
PRINCIPLE 4 The child...shall be entitled to grow and develop in health...The child shall have the right to adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and medical services.
PRINCIPLE 5 The child who is physically, mentally or socially handicapped shall be given the special treatment, education and care required by his particular condition.
PRINCIPLE 6 The child, for the full and harmonious development of his personality, needs love and understanding.

PRINCIPLE 7 The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages....The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation.
PRINCIPLE 8 The child shall in all circumstances be among the first to receive protection and relief.
PRINCIPLE 9 The child shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation...The child shall not be admitted to employment.
PRINCIPLE 10 The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious and any other form of discrimination.

841st plenary meeting,
20 November 1959.

(United Nations, 1959)

In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the <u>Declaration of the Rights of the Child</u>, which defines children's rights to protection, education, health care, shelter, good nutrition, play, and a supportive environment.

This Declaration marked a significant milestone in the recognition of children's rights on a global scale. It established children's entitlement to specific rights just because they are children, beyond individual countries' civil rights.

Although non-binding, the declaration was foundational in the developing international law on children's rights, and to the development of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.
In the Declaration's principles we see the 3 Ps emerging: protection, provision and participation, with participation least prominent by some margin.

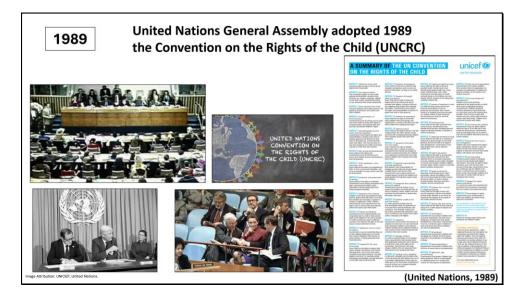**Not all countries were happy with the 1959 Declaration, however.**

REF:
UN General Assembly (1959) *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, A/RES/1386(XIV), UN General Assembly, 20 November 1959.

Slide 9

20 years after the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the UN General Assembly declared 1979 the International Year of the Child: an opportunity to foster advocacy for children and to encourage countries to promote programmes for children.
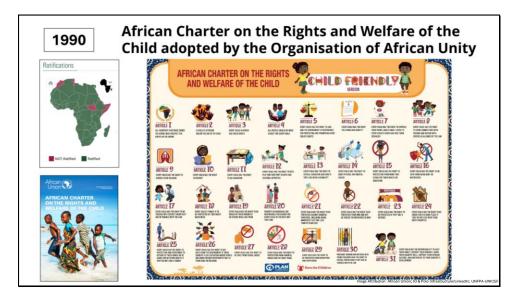
Image Attribution: UNICEF; United Nations.

(United Nations, 1989)

Then, on 20th November 1989, 30 years to the day after the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the UN General Assembly adopted the <u>Convention on the Rights of the Child</u>, drafted in part by UNICEF. The 54 articles of the Convention were adopted in New York, by acclamation (without vote), The text of the Convention (54 articles) was adopted in New York, by acclamation (without vote), unanimously of the member States of the United Nations, in resolution 44/25.

Most countries ratified UNCRC within five years of its adoption. By 2014, only Sudan, Somalia and the USA had not ratified UNCRC. Since 2015, USA is the only country that has not ratified UNCRC.
The Convention was a watershed for human rights, recognising children as social, economic, political, civil and cultural actors. UN claims it not only sets minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in all capacities, but it also guarantees them. However, children were not directly involved in the development, launch and adoption of UNCRC, so again, they were not positioned as competent social actors. More on this later

REF:
United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Treaty Series 1577 (November): 3.

Slide 11

And as an important aside, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child makes an important Global South policy contribution to child rights. Drawing on UNCRC, in 1990 this additional regional human rights instrument was adopted to address issues of specific interest and importance to children in Africa. Adopted by the Organisation of African Unity, the African Charter came into force in 1999.

Currently, all African countries have ratified the African Charter, except Morocco, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Somalia, South Sudan and Tunisia.
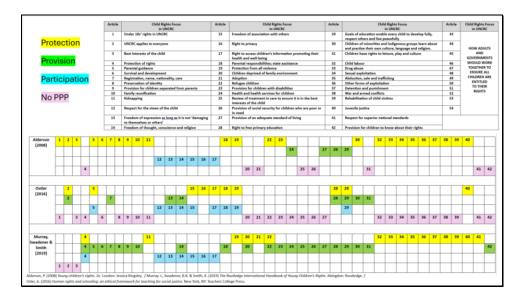
REF:
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force Nov. 29, 1999

Slide 12

Back to the global UNCRC... and where we are now? Well, let's remind ourselves, at a glance, of the focus of each of the UNCRC articles in this poster produced by UNICEF in Uganda.

All countries except the USA have ratified these articles.

And as General Comment No.5 sets out, 'When a State ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it takes on obligations under international law to implement it. Implementation is the process whereby States parties take action to ensure the realization of all rights in the Convention for all children in their jurisdiction.' (UNCRC, 2003)

Four General Principles are concerned with a child's rights to non-discrimination (Article 2), primacy afforded to his or her best interests (Article 3), life, survival and optimal development (Article 6) and being heard (Article 12) (UN, 1989). Alongside these General Principles, the three Ps – protection, provision and participation – are often used to categorise the UNCRC articles 1-42 (Bardy, 2000) – the articles which set out how children should be treated.

Some articles focus on protection, some on provision and some on participation. Some focus on more than one of the 3Ps; others may not fall into a specific 3P category.

However, there is no neat consensus on what belongs where. In these three sources alone about children's rights, there is considerable disparity in how the articles are categorised.

This is an indication of how UNCRC is open to interpretation.

REFS:
Alderson, P. (2008) *Young children's rights: exploring beliefs, principles and practice*. 2e. London: Jessica Kingsley.
Murray. J., Swadener, B.B. & Smith, K. (2019) *The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Osler, A. (2016) *Human rights and schooling: an ethical framework for teaching for social justice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Slide 14

Children's protection and participation rights, in particular, provide an interesting counterpoint in the UNCRC.

From the germ of the idea in the 1970s presented in Drietzel's *'Childhood and Socialization' and* Goodman's *'The Culture of Childhood',* sociologists had already begun to reject ideas of childhood which framed children as passive recipients of socialization by adults. This rejection developed at pace in the 1990s, following the adoption of UNCRC. The 'new sociology of childhood' rejected the narrative that children are vulnerable, weak, deficient and needy and instead recognised children's capacity to be competent social actors.

In limited ways now, we see new sociology interweaving with global policy, research and practice: children's competence as social actors is presenting more visibly now in matters affecting them than was the case 36 years ago.

REFS:
Corsaro, W.A. (1997) *The Sociology of Childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
Dreitzel, H.P. (Ed.) (1973) *Childhood and Socialization.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Goodman, M. (1970) *The Culture of Childhood.* Columbia: Teachers' College Press.
Hardman, C. (1973) Can there be an Anthropology of Childhood? Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, 4: 85-99.
James, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. (1998) *Theorising Childhood.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
James, A. and Prout, A. (Eds.) (1990) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. London: Routledge.
Jenks, C. (1990) Childhood. London: Routledge.
Mayall, B. (Ed.) (1994) *Children's Childhoods: observed and experienced*. London: Falmer Press.
Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G. & Wintersberger, H. (Eds) (1994) Childhood Matters: social theory, practice and politics. Aldershot: Avebury.
Valentine, G. (1996). Angels and Devils: Moral Landscapes of Childhood. *Environment and Planning D*, 14(5), 581-599. https://doi.org/10.1068/d140581 (Original work published 1996)

However, at the global policy level, it took a few years after UNCRC was adopted for the UN to begin to recognise children as competent social actors in matters affecting them.

Bear in mind that Article 12 affords every child the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child. UNCRC is clearly a matter that affects children. But of course, adults had formulated the UNCRC articles and it has been adults in national governments who have decided whether or not to ratify UNCRC. And it took the United Nations until 2002 to invite children to address the UN General Assembly for the first time, at its Special Session on Children. Meanwhile, in 2002, the USA was one of a handful of countries that had still not ratified UNCRC and bottom right here, you can see children marching towards the UN Headquarters in New York in a demo against child labor while a special session was taking place.

However, whilst children who spoke at the UN Special session on children 2002 read from a statement adopted by almost 400 children, those children were teenagers, for example Audrey Cheynot aged 17 (Monaco) and Gabriela Azurudy Arrieta, aged 13 (Bolivia). They were not younger children, babies or toddlers.

And of course, in line with Article 12, every child has the right to express their own views freely, but that is only if the child is deemed capable of forming their own views. And the extent to which their views are heard and responded to depends on their 'age and maturity'. So who decides if the child is capable of forming their own views, and who decides if the child is old enough or mature enough for their views to be accorded 'due weight'? Adults retain the power.

Holzscheiter et al (2025) observe that child and youth representation is now an established norm in international organizations. IN 2025, children and young people today are recognized as a 'major group' in the United Nations and children's working groups and forums have increased significantly across diverse fields of international policymaking.

The international NGO Child Rights Connect (2025) empowers children to address the world's pressing challenges. Their *Now and the Future project* seeks to ensure that children are recognized and supported as agents of change: children are not only seen as needing protection but are also empowered in shaping policies and advancing human rights. In September 2024, Child Rights Connect co-hosted a side event at the Human Rights Council at which children's voices were included in critical discussions on human rights and political participation, leading to significant advancements in recognizing children's rights, particularly in political participation.

IN the field of Health policy, in 2025, the International Network for Epidemiology in Policy (INEP) argued that there is now a global imperative to include children's voices about their physical and mental health and right to a healthy future in policy development (dosReis et al., 2025).

And in June 2025, the World Congress on Justice with Children will take place with a focus on child-centred justice.

REFS:
Child Rights Connect (2025) *Child Rights Connect: Home.* https://childrightsconnect.org/
dosReis S, Willis-Gorman R, Anderson LN, Duncan L, Gaudino JA Jr, Wilson RT, Raynes-Greenow C, Bell K; International Network for Epidemiology in Policy (INEP). (2025) An Imperative to Include Children's Voices in Policy Development: Part of the Solution to Understanding the Impact of Policy on Children's Mental Health. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 64(1):3-4. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2024.08.488. Epub 2024 Sep 6. PMID: 39245176.
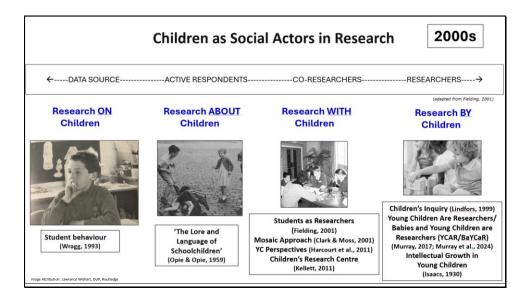Global Movement for Children (2002) *A World Fit for Children.* GMC. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/child-friendly-version-world-fit-children/
Holzscheiter, A., Josefsson, J., Lövbrand, E., & Pantzerhielm, L. (2025). In-between worlds: the unsettled politics of child and youth representation in international institutions. *Globalizations*, *22*(3), 343–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2025.2471705
OHCHR (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child*.

Children as Social Actors in Research | **2000s**

←-----DATA SOURCE---------------ACTIVE RESPONDENTS---------------CO-RESEARCHERS---------------RESEARCHERS-----→

(adapted from Fielding, 2001)

Research ON Children — Student behaviour (Wragg, 1993)

Research ABOUT Children — 'The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren' (Opie & Opie, 1959)

Research WITH Children — Students as Researchers (Fielding, 2001), Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), YC Perspectives (Harcourt et al., 2011), Children's Research Centre (Kellett, 2011)

Research BY Children — Children's Inquiry (Lindfors, 1999), Young Children Are Researchers/ Babies and Young Children are Researchers (YCAR/BaYCaR) (Murray, 2017; Murray et al., 2024), Intellectual Growth in Young Children (Isaacs, 1930)

Image Attribution: Lawrence Wishart; OUP; Routledge

At the beginning of the C21st, children's capacity as researchers was only just becoming recognised. On my first visit to an international early years conference there were nearly 1000 delegates but no child in sight. And a highly a respected early years researcher spent her down time at the hotel she was staying during the conference making observations of young children; the ethics were questionable at the very least.

But the new sociology movement started to influence research concerned with children and the matters affecting them.
There was a shift from research positioning children…
•   As a data source – or 'objects' of research - for example in Exeter University's study of student behaviour in schools (Wragg, 1993), and
•   As active respondents in research – that is 'subjects' of research – for instance Opie and Opie's interviews with around 5,000 school-age children for the *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* project (1959),
To research positioning children…
•   As Co-researchers, such as the Students as Researchers project led by Michael Fielding with secondary students, Mary Kellett's children's research centre and Alison Clark and Peter Moss' Mosaic Approach, affording children opportunities to use data collection approaches developed by adults to express their views on matters that affect them, and
•   As researchers themselves - where researcher agency sits with the child who decides what and how to research. Here, the adult focuses on recognizing and understanding the complex and sophisticated cognitive processes that underpin what may often appear at first glance to be children's everyday simple actions. The Young Children Are Researchers project, and more recently, the Babies and Young Children

are Researchers project are examples of this category of research. However, Susan Isaacs was also exploring research BY children nearly 100 years ago.

REFS:

Clark, A. & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children, the mosaic approach. London:* National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Fielding, M. (2001) Students as Radical Agents of Change. *Journal of Educational Change*. 2(3): 123-141.

Kellett, M. Empowering Children and Young People as Researchers: Overcoming Barriers and Building Capacity. *Child Ind Res* **4**, 205–219 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-010-9103-1

Murray, J. (2017) Building Knowledge in Early Childhood Education: Young Children Are Researchers. Abingdon: Routledge.

Murray, J., Harris, J. and Finch-Kerr, N. (2024) 'Babies and Young Children are Researchers (BAYCAR) Pilot 1.' Paper presentation at the *European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference, University of Brighton, UK, 3-4 September 2024.*

Opie, P. and Opie, I. (1959) *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren.* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wragg, E.C. (1993) *Primary Teaching Skills.* London: Routledge.

NOTES:
Fielding (2001: 125) Investigation into 'the issue of student involvement in the life of the school and, more particularly, at the issue of student voice.'

Kellett (2011:) 'In challenging the barrier implied by children's lack of research skills, the Children's Research Centre (tat the Open University) **has developed a training programme for children, which encapsulates the core ingredients of empirical research skills** *based around: the nature of research, framing a research question, common data collection techniques, simple qualitative and quantitative analysis & dissemination & presentation skills delivered through differentiated knowledge transfer, activities and games.'*

Children as Social Actors in Practice

Key components of voice practices for advancing right-based education (Wall et al., 2017; 2018)

(Brooks and Murray 2016; Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi, 1994; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Freire, 1998; Wall et al., 2017; 2018)

Image Attribution: Kids Play Childcare; Wall et al., 2024

Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1994) regard children as rich, competent social actors from birth. As the context for effective pedagogy, they propose 'a vision of a possible meeting place' where opportunities for 'a strong and equal partnership' between child and adult can be fostered. This idea aligns with Freire's idea of the teacher as the learner and the learner as the teacher (1998). It also draws on Malaguzzi's pedagogy of listening, which is central to the work of the Reggio Emilia nurseries (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). In pedagogic contexts such as these, young children's right to express their views and have them listened to are reified. Dahlberg ad Lenz Taguchi's meeting place is an ideal space for encouraging young ; children's voices which are not only their verbal contributions in social contexts but are also their 'views…that are actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children's lives' (Brooks and Murray 2016).

Wall et al. (2017; 2018) have developed an eight point model for promoting voice practices that advance right-based education and by doing so promote young children as agentic social actors in the learning environment.
Definition of 'voice' in context
Power dynamics are acknowledged
*Inclusivity. Y*oung children, are capable and competent in expressing their views
Active Listening. the listener tunes in, engages so children know they have been heard and their voices are respected, valued and can have influence.
Time and space. support young children to feel comfortable to express their views and for these to be listened to, taken seriously and acted on.
Approaches. Practitioners consciously adopt a flexible approach when listening to, and facilitating the voices of, young children

Processes. and structures in a setting are conducive to facilitating and responding to children's voices

Purposes: Practices aimed at promoting children's voices based on a shared understanding and on shared goals (Wall et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2022).

REFS:

Brooks, E. and Murray, J. (2018) Ready, steady, learn: school readiness and children's voices in English early childhood settings. *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education.* 46 (2): 143-156. DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2016.1204335

Dahlberg, G. and Lenz Taguchi, H. (1994)Förskola och skola – om två skilda traditioner och om visionen om en mötesplats (Pre-school and school – two different traditions and the vision of a meeting place). Stockholm: HLS Förlag.

Dahlberg, G. and Moss, P. (2005). Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*. Washington DC: Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Wall, K., Arnott, L., Cassidy, C., Beaton, M., Christensen, S., Dockett, S., Hall, E., et al. (2017) "Look Who's talking: Eliciting the Voices of Children from Birth to Seven". *International Journal of Student Voice* 2 (1), https://ijvs.psu.edu.

Wall, K., Cassidy, C., Arnott, L., Beaton, M., Blaisdell, C., Hall, E., McKernan, G., Mitra, D., Pramling, I., and Robinson, C. (2018) "Look Who's Talking: Factors for Considering the Facilitation of Very Young Children's Voices" Paper presented at AERA, New York, April 13-17.

Slide 18

Our Youngest Children's Rights
Some Current Barriers...

Image Attribution: BabyCentre UK; Brian Penny at Pixabay; Green Teacher; Pinterest; UNICEF; United Nations

We've made 'the rights start'. In limited ways now, we see new sociology interweaving with global policy, research and practice: children's competence as social actors is presenting more visibly now in matters affecting them than was the case 36 years ago. However, significant problems are preventing the full realisation of children's rights, and this is particularly the case for the youngest children.

- **We have got policy in place that is ratified in almost every country and together with the new sociology, it has set the scene in many ways for young children to be recognised as competent social actors. But it's not quite there yet.**

- **We have worked out some ways of recognising young children as co-researchers and researchers in their own lives (Alison Clark's work, the Young Children are researchers and Babies and Young Children are researchers.**

- **We know some ways that children can be competent social actors in practice.**

- **Yet 36 years later, the promise of rights for all children - especially the youngest - to protection, provision and participation remains unfulfilled. So while we may have made children's rights start, we are not there yet. Children's rights are not fully realised. (Lundy, Kilkelly, Byrne and Kang, 2012; Murray et al., 2019)**

- **So now let's look at some barriers that are preventing the realisation of our youngest children's rights currently, REFS:**

REFS
Lundy, L, Kilkelly, U, Byrne, B and Kang, J (2012), The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: A study of legal implementation in 12 countries, London: UNICEF-UK.
Murray. J., Swadener, B.B. & Smith, K. (2019) *The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Slide 19

Barrier 1. Tensions in rights

Image Attribution: Green Teacher

Tensions in rights themselves create the first barrier.

Whilst 'all people are entitled to... basic rights' (Amnesty International, 2011), there are adults' rights and children's rights and rights that both groups share (Feinberg, 1980).

Two types of children's rights focus on 'being' and 'becoming' (Qvortrup, 1994): rights to goods such as food, shelter, love and freedom from harm and 'rights to an open future', for example, education (Archard, 2011; Feinberg, 1980).

Individual countries tend to prioritise UNCRC protection rights over children's provision and participation rights (Mayall, 2006; Parton, 2005), and when a child is positioned as a passive recipient of protection rights, participation rights may be compromised. But all 3 Ps are necessary.

Child participation rights may also be read as oppositional respecting of elders in some cultures (Ndimande and Swadener, 2013; Una, 2017), highlighting that the UNCRC is a document laden with western cultural norms.

REFS:
Amnesty International (2011) *Human Rights Basics.* Retrieved from:
http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/human-rights-basics
Archard, D.W. (2011) 'Children's Rights.' In E.N. Zalta (Ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition)*. Retrieved from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-children/
Feinberg, J. (1980) 'A Child's Right to an Open Future.' In W. Aiken, and H. LaFollette (Eds.) *Whose Child? Parental Rights, Parental Authority and State Power*, pp.124–153. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, and Co.
Mayall, B. (2006). 'Values and assumptions underpinning policy for children and young people in England.'*Children's Geographies*, *4*(1), 9 — 17.
Ndimande, B.S. and Swadener, B.B. (2013). Children's rights and cultural tensions in South Africa. International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood. 10(1), 79-92.
Parton, N. (2005). *Safeguarding Childhood. Early intervention and surveillance in late modern society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G. & Wintersberger, H. (Eds) (1994) *Childhood Matters: social theory, practice and politics.* Aldershot: Avebury.
Una Children's Rights Learning Group. 2011. Children's Rights in Cultural Contexts. Working Paper 8. Belfast, Northern Ireland: Una (Queens College).

A second barrier presents in Article 12, the participation right which states that children may express their views freely in matters affecting them only if the child is deemed 'capable of forming his or her own views', to which others then accord 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.

Article 12 assumes, then, that age may equate with capacity, but this is not so. Lansdown (2005) argues that children's 'acquisition of competencies will vary according to circumstances' and that their 'capacities can differ according to the nature of the rights to be exercised' (Lansdown, 2005). Van Beers *et al*., (2008) argue that 'reference to "evolving capacities" is often made when adults decide to include or exclude children from various aspects of social life' (p. 54).

And UN General Comment No.7 (OHCHR, 2005) explicitly recognises: '…young children as social actors from the beginning of life, with particular interests, capacities and vulnerabilities, and of requirements for protection, guidance and support in the exercise of their rights' (p.2).
Alderson and Yoshida (2019) argue further that '…babies are far more like all other human beings than used to be believed, and that all UNCRC Articles apply to them to respect their inalienable human rights.'
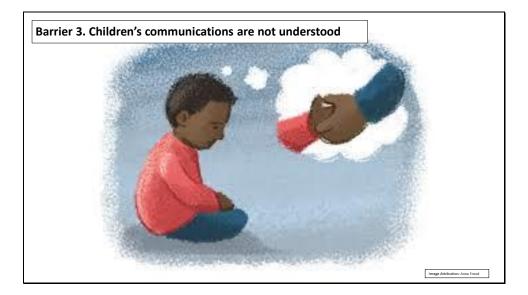
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Barrier 3. Children's communications are not understood

Image Attribution: Anna Freud

A third barrier is that adults often struggle to recognise young children's communications. They 'try to interpret them in adult terms' (Hardman, 1973: 95), with te result that young children are denied their Article 12 and Article 13 rights to free expression in matters affecting them.

Yet there is good evidence to suggest that humans can express their views regarding matters affecting them from birth: neonates assert their identities, personhood and self-expression when they make their first cry (Alderson *et al*., 2008; Meltzoff and Moore, 1977; Trevarthen, 2004). Even 'preverbal babies can reason and feel, fear and hope, have views and aims and moral relationships' (Alderson and Yoshida, 2019).

'Although parents or others may try their best to speak for the children and communicate on their behalf, they may ignore other non-verbal messages from children that express other wishes' (Mortari, De Panfilis, and Ghirotto, 2019).

REFS:
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One space where young children enjoyed primacy for generations preceding UNCRC, is play. Children's right to play is recognised in Article 31.

Yet in the C21st, young children's right to play is threatened across the World. IN Chile, Jadue Roa and Knust (2019) found that young children's wishes to play outdoors were sidelined as they moved into formal schooling aged 6 years, an experience mirrored in many other school systems globally.

Nikiforidou (2019) also highlights tensions between Articles 31 focused on play and 19 which focuses on protecting the child from violence, injury and abuse. She argues that 'Children have the right to protection, but not to overprotection, and they have the right to play, but not to play deprivation. By positioning them in an innocent, vulnerable or dependant framework, we do not give them enough opportunities to develop their own understanding and consideration of risks, threats, safety and protection.'

REFS
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Barrier 5. Respectful, Respected Educators

These two children were in the 0 Class in a school in Ethiopia that I visited for a UNICEF project about social and emotional learning. Their teacher was 16 years old.

Fleet and Britt (2011) observe that young '…children are often the most silenced participants in the educative process' (p.143). Cannella (2002) goes further, describing the child in formal education as 'silenced...controlled, oppressed, labelled and limited' (p.162).

Children's right to education can only be realised if education is respectful of the child (Nutbrown, 1996; 2019). Nutbrown (1996; 2019) proposes that factors that are antithetical to Article 28 - children's right to education – include poverty, curriculum delivery rather than co-construction of learning, and low status of early educators.

Moss (2005) suggests that the child's right to early childhood education is undermined when care and education are not integrated and when universal norms of performance are adopted in provision.

Gupta (2019) agrees and argues for 'children's right to a culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum so that children are not measured by dominant global standards' but instead learn 'the skills they need in order to flourish in their local cultural context'.

Teacher recruitment and retention is a challenge in many countries it is acute in many Global South countries. Africa will need to add another 31 million teachers by the 2050s to match high-income countries.

REFS:

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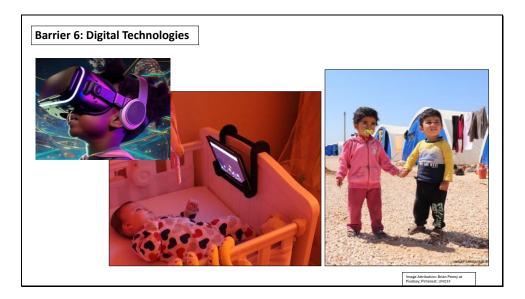
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Barrier 6: Digital Technologies

Image Attribution: Brian Penny at Pixabay; Pinterest; UNICEF

We have seen exponential advances in digital technologies in the past 36 years which mean that the Convention does not reflect the technological revolution.

Digital technologies in young children's hands stimulate contested views: they are widely recognised as problematic yet regarded as potentially valuable.

Young children's access to digital technologies is unequal within countries and across borders. 'Digitalization can empower children. It allows them to create, learn and connect with friends while laying the foundation for their future economic prospects. But it can also expose children to online risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse.' (UN, 2024)

Nottingham (2019) highlights 'dangers of sharenting' and digital kidnapping caused when adults post videos and images of young children online, causing emotional harm… The negative effects of
'sharenting' will not necessarily be immediately apparent at the time that images or information are posted on social media (but) problems might materialise in the future.'
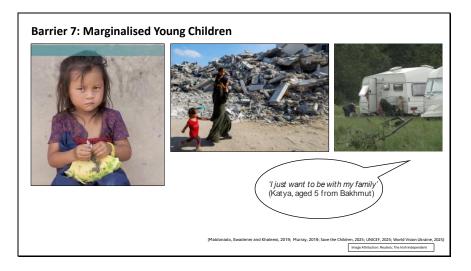
However, Devecchi (2019) argues that digital technologies could break down barriers to young refugee children accessing education. She highlights the UN UNITE Global Challenge
#BlockchainEducationalPassport which be a safe place for storing learning credentials… Creating such a record as early as possible for each refugee child, beginning with their early childhood education, has the potential to optimise the benefit of their formal, non-formal and informal learning for their lifetime outcomes.'

REFS:

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UNICEF (2024) *State of the World's Children.* https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

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Globally, unprecedented numbers of young children have become marginalised from their homes and communities in recent years, and many are not afforded their right to appropriate protection and humanitarian support. Wars in the Middle East and Ukraine have displaced millions of children, with millions also malnourished, losing education and suffering psychological trauma (Save the Children, 2025; UNICEF, 2025; World Vision Ukraine, 2025).

At the borderlands of the US and Mexico, Maldonado, Swadener and Khaleesi (2019) reveal 'family separations in the name of enforcing federal immigration law without regard for children's human rights' They found that 'The immigrant identity is systematically criminalized, policed, forbidden, prohibited, and misconstrued.'

In Ireland, Murray (2019) notes that traveller children 'face considerable challenges to have their rights upheld and to reach their full potential…layers of racism and discrimination at institutional and individual levels inhibit and complicate policy implementation, budget allocation and robust actions to address exclusion.'
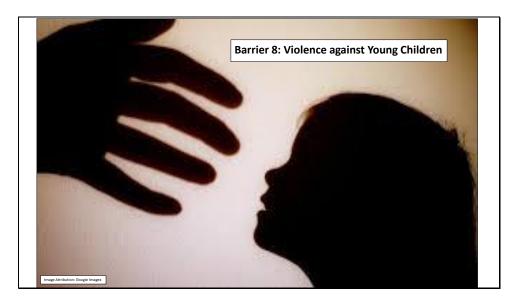
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Violence against young children is a significant barrier to achieving Article 19.

Infants and young children are often invisible in child protection – Lumsden (2019) reminds us that 'our youngest global citizens continue to face adversity. Their everyday lives, well-being and lifetime outcomes continue to be affected by physical, emotional and sexual violence and neglect.'

The issues she raises are endemic worldwide. Lopez (2019) shines a light on young children's experiences of growing up with domestic violence in the US and in the Eastern Caribbean, violence against children, especially sexual abuse, is a significant problem (Murray, Harper, McClean Trotman and Stewart, 2019).

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Barrier 9: Climate Change

(UNICEF 2024)

Image Attribution: UNICEF

Children are highly vulnerable to effects of climate change, with risks increasing in coming years (UNICEF 2024).

By the 2050s, many more children will be exposed to extreme climate hazards compared with the turn of the century:

8 x more children will be exposed to extreme heatwaves.

3 x more children will be exposed to flooding

2 x more children exposed to extreme wildfires.

REF:

UNICEF (2024) *The State of the World's Children*. https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

Our Youngest Children's Rights
Some Future Possibilities…

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK; United Nations, 2024

In the future, if we want our future child to flourish, what can we do to reify our youngest children's rights?' Well… here are some future possibilities. Let's envision a world…

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… Where Children's Rights tensions are resolved for young children because
- We respect young children's capacity to make rational decisions that lead to competent actions (Kelly and Smith, 2017; Murray, 2016)
- Respect young children's participation rights to enable them to reify their own rights (Ruiz-Casares, Collins, Tisdall, and Grover, 2017).

REFS:
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Slide 30

Future possibility 2: Young children are recognised as competent social actors

- Provide stimulating, safe environments where all children are acknowledged to have capacity from birth to form and express their views
- Respect and respond to young children's views concerning matters that affect them

(Bardy, 2000; Human Early Learning Partnership, 2012; Swadener and Polakow, 2011; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2006)

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK: UNICEF

A world where young children are recognised as competent social actors because…

- We provide stimulating, safe environments where all children are acknowledged to have capacity from birth to form and express their views, and
- We respect and respond to young children's views concerning matters that affect them
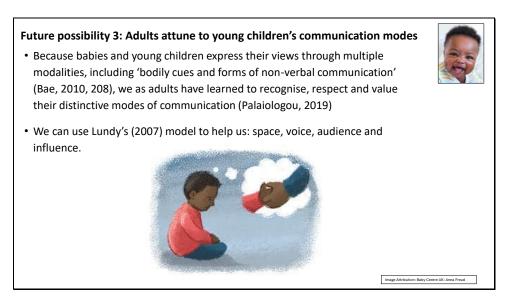
The idea of children as competent social actors is not new to those of us in early childhood education. Dating back to the 1800s, pioneers Froebel, Isaacs and Montessori had already noted YOUNG children's competences in contexts where adults afford them freedom, time and space to build knowledge for themselves.

REFS:
Bardy, M. (2000) 'The three Ps of children's rights: Provision, protection and participation.' *CYC-Online*, *16*. Retrieved from: http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0500-threepees.html
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UN Committee on the Rights of the Child UN General Comment No.7 (OHCHR, 2006)

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Future possibility 3: Adults attune to young children's communication modes
- Because babies and young children express their views through multiple modalities, including 'bodily cues and forms of non-verbal communication' (Bae, 2010, 208), we as adults have learned to recognise, respect and value their distinctive modes of communication (Palaiologou, 2019)
- We can use Lundy's (2007) model to help us: space, voice, audience and influence.

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK: Anna Freud

A World where adults attune to young children's communication modes
- Because babies and young children express their views through multiple modalities, including 'bodily cues and forms of non-verbal communication' (Bae, 2010, 208), we as adults have learned to recognise, respect and value their distinctive modes of communication (Palaiologou, 2019)
- We can use Lundy's (2007) model to help us: space, voice, audience and influence.

REFS:
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A World where young children have many opportunities to play, because

- We have provided play opportunities so 'young children develop their own understanding and consideration of risks, threats, safety and protection…the "cotton wool" child can be transformed into an agentic child who is involved in the decision-making and management of safeguarding, risk and well-being in their own play.' (Nikiforidou, 2019)

- Help young children develop healthily with a sense of belonging by offering safe, free environments to explore and play in their communities (Smith, Sewell and Smale, 2019).

REFS:
Nikiforidou, Z. (2019) Risk and Safety in Western Society. In Murray, J., Swadener, B.B. and Smith, K. (Eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights*. Pp.97-106. Abingdon: Routledge.
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Future possibility 5: Early Educators are Respected and Respectful
- Early educators' professional development, progression, pay and conditions are aligned with educators working in other age phases.
- Early educators adopt child centred approaches, affording young children free play and valuing their home cultures to meet their physical and psychological needs.
- Early childhood programmes and practice promote the child as an active agent with rights and responsibilities.

(Bull et al., 2024; Nutbrown, 2012; Palfi et al., 2019; Pascal et al., 2020)

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK; Community Playthings

- A World where **Early Educators are Respected and Respectful,**
- Where Early educators' professional development, progression, pay and conditions are aligned with educators working in other age phases.
- Where early educators adopt child centred approaches, affording young children free play and valuing their home cultures to meet their physical and psychological needs.
- And where early childhood programmes and practice promote the child as an active agent with rights and responsibilities.

REFS:

Bull, R., McFarland, L., Cumming, T. and Wong, S. (2024) The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 69: 13-24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.06.002.

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Future possibility 6: Young children's rights are equally respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment.

- Digital equality for young children is secured through investments.
- Young children's digital literacy and skills complement traditional learning.
- Legislation protects children's rights in digital environments.
- Robust ethical guidelines for technology development are adopted
- Rights-based governance for new technologies, with oversight mechanisms to anticipate risks

(UNICEF 2024; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021)

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK: WizeFloor

A World where young children's rights are equally respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment through…
- **Digital equality**
- **Digital literacy and skills complementary to traditional learning.**
- **Legislation**
- **Robust ethical guidelines**
- **Rights-based governance**

REFS:
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Future possibility 7: An inclusive World where children feel they belong,

- Where child-responsive cities have been created with safe and nurturing spaces, infrastructure, and support for children and their families
- Where shock-responsive social protection systems are sufficient, and
- Where there is ready access to maternal, newborn, child and adolescent healthcare.

REF:
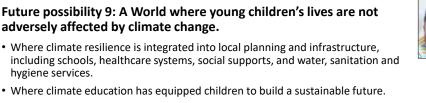UNICEF (2024) *State of the World's Children.* https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

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Future possibility 8: A World where young children are free from violence

Featuring…

- Frameworks for child caregiving and protection, developed with children.
- Financial and technical support
- Human, financial and technical resources
- Co-operation

(UN CRC, 2011)

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK: Dim Star Creations

A World where young children are free from violence,
- Where States parties have adopted frameworks for child caregiving and protection, developed in consultation with children.
- Where Sources of financial and technical support are provided systematically through national and international partnerships.
- Where Human, financial and technical resources are provided at the international level.
- Where there is Regional and international cross-border cooperation.

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Future possibility 9: A World where young children's lives are not adversely affected by climate change.
- Where climate resilience is integrated into local planning and infrastructure, including schools, healthcare systems, social supports, and water, sanitation and hygiene services.
- Where climate education has equipped children to build a sustainable future.
- Where children's needs are addressed in climate strategies.
- Where investments in renewable energy have cut emissions.
- Where pollution is reduced to healthy levels.

(UNICEF, 2024)

Image Attribution: Baby Centre UK: Future Visions

And... **A World where young children's lives are not adversely affected by climate change.**
- Where climate resilience is integrated into local planning and infrastructure, including schools, healthcare systems, social supports, and water, sanitation and hygiene services.
- Where climate education has equipped children to build a sustainable future.
- Where children's needs are addressed in climate strategies.
- Where investments in renewable energy have cut emissions.
- Where pollution is reduced to healthy levels.

REF:
UNICEF (2024) *State of the World's Children.* https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

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To conclude, thank you for joining me on our journey together… we have reflected together briefly on the children's rights story so far, we have considered some barriers that are preventing the realisation of our youngest children's rights currently, and we looked forward to consider future possibilities that we may enact to enable our youngest children to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled.

I hope our time together has afforded you some space and time to reflect on what you have done, what you are doing currently, and what's next for you as you continue your invaluable work towards making young children's rights real.

Thank you.

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