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THE METHODOLOGY OF FOCUS GROUPS ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS COMPOSED OF CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY CONDUCTED WITH CHILDREN IN BULGARIA, GREECE, HUNGARY, IRELAND, THE NETHERLANDS, POLAND, SWEDEN AND THE UK

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Abstract:-A comparative qualitative study titled Speak up! was conducted with children in eight European countries. The aims were to increase our knowledge about European children in vulnerable situations or with special needs and to elicit their views about their rights and what needs to be improved. The methodology of the project involved playing a children's rights game and holding in-depth discussions in focus groups with children in vulnerable situations and with control groups. The vulnerable groups comprised children with disabilities, asylum-seeking children, children living in 'urban pockets of poverty', Roma children, Traveller children, children in juvenile justice institutions and children in care. The control groups were made up of children with mixed backgrounds from ordinary classes in regular school. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) all children have the right to be listened to, however many children, particularly children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, have very little experience of being listened to. They face discrimination due to disability, ethnic background or social disadvantage, as well as for being under 18 years old. The methodology of the Speak up! project shows that children in vulnerable situations or with special needs can take part in research and other activities where they communicate their experiences and suggest ideas for how to improve their situation in line with the UN CRC. Consultations need to be adapted to their specific circumstances and communication needs, and the children need to be able to trust the interviewer/moderator.

Keywords: Children; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Vulnerable situations; Focus groups; Comparative study; Children's Participation; Europe.

INTRODUCTION

The right to be heard and taken seriously is fundamental to the human dignity and healthy development of every child and young person. In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) children have the right to participate, to have their voices heard and to be listened to (United Nations, 1989). They also have the right to be able to influence decisions affecting them (Article 12). Children living in particularly vulnerable situations are also guaranteed special protection. The project *Speak up! Voices of European children in vulnerable situations*, involving children from eight European countries living in vulnerable situations and control groups of children from ordinary classes in regular schools in each country, aims to study and promote these rights. This article focuses on the methodological question of how to consult with children in focus groups, and particularly with children who live in vulnerable circumstances or have special needs.

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Method used to consult with children: A theoretical analysis of the use of focus groups with children

Focus group consultations have been used to examine both children's and adults' perceptions and experiences of particular topics (Kitzinger, 1994; Tinnfält, 2007, Brunnberg, 2013). The method has been used since the 1920s in studies of attitudes and perceptions (McLafferty, 2004; Walden, 2006). The term 'focus group' can refer to researchers interviewing several children or young people at once. In a focus group, the consultation is structured to explore individuals' perceptions and experiences of a theme chosen by the researchers (Kitzinger, 1994; McLafferty, 2004; Tinnfält, 2007; Brunnberg, 2013). The interviewer decides the focus of the session but generally has little control over the conversation (Trost, 2005). The goal is to explore perceptions, ideas and values in a group of individuals as well as how their feelings can affect their behaviour (Walden, 2006). The interviewer/moderator leads the focus group and can sometimes intervene to ensure that all participants have a chance to express their views. The moderator can also take action to deepen the discussion. The other facilitator is an observer, and is present in the room to make observations of the interaction. A tape recorder or video camera may be used to record the session. If no video recording is made, the observer can take notes on what is said and done. The observer remains passive in the conversation. Consultations with children in focus groups can be used as a methodology that is in line with the UN CRC, and can be conducted in many different ways. In a focus group conducted with children, the adult facilitator is in charge. Other techniques can be used to create a process led by the children themselves, such as a research circle (see Åkerström & Brunnberg, 2013). In this study, all focus groups were led by adults. The number of participants in a focus group can vary between four and twenty (McLafferty, 2004) but focus groups with less than four participants have also taken place. The recommended number of participants is six to twelve (Walden, 2006). The number chosen can be influenced by the situation, the age of the participants, the theme to be discussed and the need to create a comfortable situation for the participants. Small and homogeneous groups tend to work better than heterogeneous groups (McLafferty, 2004). The process of working with focus groups can be divided into four components: (1) design and planning, (2) selection of participants, (3) carrying out the discussion session, and (4) analysing and reporting the results (Walden, 2006). In this project, the focus groups with children in vulnerable situations mainly followed these four steps.

AIM OF THE PROJECT

The overall aim of the project was to increase our knowledge and understanding of European children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, and to enable children in vulnerable situations to voice their views about their rights and about what things need to be improved for them to get access to their rights in accordance with the UN CRC. The results from the project are mainly presented in other reports and articles. See 'Speak up! Final report '(Eurochild 2012); Brunnberg & Visser-Schuurman, (expected May 2015 International Journal of Children's Rights). The Speak up! project highlighted three key gaps in the protection of children's rights in Europe: (1) Children – and in particular those in vulnerable circumstances – are insufficiently aware of their rights. (2) Children still face enormous discrimination due to the very fact of being under 18. Age discrimination against children is poorly recognized and understood, and few policies are in place to address it. (3) Children are rarely asked their opinion on matters that affect them. Children living in vulnerable circumstances were found to have very little experience of being listened to.

The aim of this article is to examine and discuss the methodological approach applied when holding in-depth discussions on children's rights in focus groups with children in vulnerable situations or having special needs, as well as in control groups. This will add to the knowledge about performing qualitative comparative research with children in vulnerable situations from several countries.

DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

This project is a qualitative study involving children in vulnerable situations from eight European countries and a control group of children from regular schools in these countries. Most of the children were consulted in focus groups where they played a children's rights game. The exception was the children in juvenile justice institutions who, due to their situation, were partly consulted in individual interviews and partly in a small focus-group meeting. The project is exploratory and is highly varied in terms of both the vulnerable situations the children may find themselves in and the composition of the focus groups (see Table 1). The facilitators worked in diverse ways, taking inspiration from a toolbox (Eurochild 2011a) and a knowledge base (Eurochild 2011b). All the children were given a basic understanding of the UN CRC, both through information provided by the researchers and by playing a game about children's rights that was developed and tested as a method to help children discuss and reflect on their rights without needing much prior knowledge about UN CRC. All groups except those in Bulgaria used the children's rights game. As a pedagogical activity, the game was designed so that all the children would be able to learn about their rights as children and relate their experiences to the same framework. From the children's position, it was a fun game in which they selected four rights as the most important rights for them. The discussion about the four selected

children's rights focused on four sets of questions:

- *Children's own awareness of and knowledge about their rights*: Are children aware of their rights, and what do they know about their rights?
- *The specific needs of the children*: What are the specific needs of children in relation to the implementation of the four selected rights? Are they in contact with people who do not consider their points of view on their specific rights? How do they feel about not being listened to or finding out that their rights are not respected?
- *Proposals for policies or actions for children at national, regional or local level*: What solutions do they suggest to ensure that their rights will be (better) respected?
- *Proposals for policies or actions for children at EU level:* The facilitator can ask the children whether they can think of more general solutions. Translating this to an EU level should be done by the facilitator(s) of the meeting, with the help of the European consultant.

Ethics

The project was reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala, Sweden (Ref. no. 2011/195) whose recommendations were followed in all countries. It was assumed that the children would participate voluntarily, but the facilitators of one of the vulnerable groups noted that some children seemed to have been forced to participate by staff at the residential home. However, the children in this group chose not to leave, were very enthusiastic, and indicated in the evaluation of the meeting that they had fun.

Comparative qualitative studies with children

Child welfare is a complex domain that includes a theoretical as well as a practical perspective from a research and development angle. Welfare systems can be constructed in different ways in different countries. There is also a generational perspective in welfare studies, which can be about adults' or children's experiences. In this project you can hear the voices of children describing their experiences of the welfare system from a children's rights perspective. The child welfare laws in different countries can offer different contexts, but almost all countries in the world have ratified the UN CRC, giving the children the same rights. As of July 2014 two states have still not ratified the UN CRC, South Sudan and the USA. These countries did not take part in the project. Traditional comparative studies exist about the different welfare systems, with adults in different countries answering surveys about resources or making assessments in vignette studies with fictive cases (see Khoo, 2004; Brunnberg, & Pe nik, 2007). But transnational comparative studies with children and young people as respondents are scarce; only a few examples can be found (see WHO, 2013). Given that children in vulnerable situations are not often listened to in research, and that there is a particular lack of transnational comparative studies about how they perceive their life situation, this project can be considered as methodologically unique.

Participants

Children aged 12–15 years (with the exception of a few as young as 7 or as old as 16) participated in focus-group meetings in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the UK. The project tried to achieve a geographical balance of children from across the European Union, including Southern Europe (Greece), Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland), Western Europe (Ireland, UK and Netherlands) and Northern Europe (Sweden). In each country two parallel groups of 8–12 children were formed, one of which was a control group with children from randomized secondary schools who, unlike the main groups, did not live in particularly vulnerable circumstances or have vulnerable characteristics. However, it was noted that several individual children in the control groups also had a particular vulnerability. The selected groups of children in vulnerable situations could vary according to country. The vulnerable groups included deaf or hard-of-hearing children, asylum-seeking children living in an asylum centre, children living in 'urban pockets of poverty', Roma children, Traveller children, children in juvenile justice institutions (secure establishments), and children in care.

Table 1. Countries, groups of children in vulnerable situations, and the length of the focus groups sessions.

Country	Children and young people in vulnerable situations or with special needs consulted by partners	Length of meeting
Bulgaria	Roma children from rural areas	Residential weekend
Greece	Roma children	A sequence of shorter sessions
Hungary	Children in residential care and children in foster care	One and a halfdays
Ireland	Traveller children	Three meetings
Netherlands	Asylum-seeking children living in asylum centres	Half-day meeting
Poland	Children living in 'urban poverty pockets'	One-day meeting
Sweden	Deaf and hard-of-hearing children	Residential weekend
UK	Children in Secure Children's Homes	Individual interviews and one small focus group.

The conditions that create vulnerability vary from country to country. The nature of the vulnerability varied, but the children were identified by researchers as members of the most vulnerable groups in their countries. There is more than one group in each country with conditions creating vulnerability, but only one of the groups took part in this project. In each country, the choice of group was based on the researchers having knowledge about the group and experience of working with them. This would facilitate the work with the children and promote their trust.

Children in vulnerable situations

Children at risk of abuse and neglect are not easy for adults in society to identify. Denial and secrecy are issues in troubled families, where not talking about the situation or telling outsiders about it is typically the rule (Christensen 1997; Tinnfält, Eriksson & Brunnberg, 2011). Shame and guilt are factors that can increase reluctance to disclose family secrets, and children of all ages can repress such problems or dissociate themselves from them (Svedin & Back 2003). In a project with adolescent children of alcoholics, it was found that before disclosure the children needed to raise their own level of awareness, maybe by telling a peer, telling an adult stranger, or indirectly communicating with an adult about their situation (Tinnfält, Eriksson & Brunnberg, 2011). It seems they needed to verbalize their story, test it with a friend, and assess the trustworthiness of adults before disclosing their problematic situation and need of help. So in the Speak up! project it was necessary for the facilitators to win the children's trust in order to elicit their stories and to learn more about their experiences.

Methodology in the Speak up! project – Focus groups

In most of the groups a discussion was organized using creative elements to explore the children's perceptions and experiences of children's rights. These could include putting together magazines, taking photos, or painting pictures to illustrate their ideas. They could be different in different groups. There were also some groups that only used the children's rights game as a common activity. Every focus group had at least two facilitators. There could be more if they needed to speak several languages, as in the group of children with hearing disabilities, who communicated in both sign language and spoken language. The same model was used for the children in vulnerable circumstances and for children in the 'control' groups.

The methodology thus included a variety of activities. However the Speak up! model of focus groups included a 'fixed programme' to be used in a flexible way. It began with the facilitators welcoming the children and first giving an *introduction* to the consultation process, its purpose and objectives. The facilitators explained the roles of the different adults present, such as facilitator, interpreter, social worker, child carer etc., and of the child-protection measures in the country. The session continued with *warm-up activities*, such as an introduction game to help the children get to know each other, including learning each other's names if necessary.

The children then agreed on a *'contract'*. This consisted of ground rules to be followed throughout the focus-group meeting(s)to make the children feel safe and willing to participate. The children could suggest rules, which were written up or drawn on a poster hanging on the wall. At the end of this session they all agreed on these rules and signed the 'contract'/poster. This gave the children a pleasant atmosphere to participate in.

Examples of ground rules included:

- Everyone listens to each other when someone else is speaking and we do not interrupt each other.
- You have the right to change your mind.
- Everyone has the right not to participate if they do not feel ready.
- There are no right or wrong opinions; all views are treated as equal.
- All mobile phones will be kept mute or be switched off during the consultations.

The next part of the meeting involved *playing the Children's rights game and/or doing other creative activities* that could help the children give information about their experiences and improve their knowledge of children's rights. For instance, they might produce a *magazine* about relevant themes. They could hold a *'World Café'* in which participants (3 to 4 children) sat around tables (like in a café) having conversations about their rights. Participants could change tables and talk, play, and draw on the tablecloths with different children. After several rounds, the children took part in a whole-group conversation, sharing their discoveries and insights. They also could engage in *Role Playing* .Specific situations were described by the facilitator and the children were asked to play the different roles. They could conduct *PI-interviews*, a specific model for focus groups where the session begins with all participants taking two different-coloured Post It-notes and writing something positive and something negative about the theme of the session. All participants read each other's main ideas about the subject and then begin a discussion about positive and negative aspects. The focus groups also end with a creative activity phase concerning the future. Children are asked to think of a wish for the future that is related to the theme and to write it on two sunbeams; the session is then ended by making a sun out of all the participants' dreams about the future. During the focus-group sessions there might be a need for some *Energizers*. These are activities done between consultation sessions to give the children renewed energy for the next consultation round. Energizers can be activities in which children sing, dance, engage in physical activities or play a game. The important thing is that they are fun for the children.

The focus groups were constructed in different ways in different countries, but all worked with children's rights. The facilitators in each country worked from a common toolbox where they used various evaluation methods depending on the specific circumstances in each country and group. An activity used in all but one of the countries was to play the children's right game. The *'kaleidoscope of experience'* was used as a basis for the consultations. It asks children to talk about their daily lives and the activities they are involved in related to children's rights, as well as the people they are in contact with during these activities and whether these people listen seriously to them. After this, the children could go into more depth about specific children's rights and their personal experiences.

All focus groups were *evaluated by the participating children*. Different evaluation methods were provided to the groups and it was left to the facilitators to choose the one that was most appropriate for that group at that time. These included evaluation questions to enable children to evaluate the focus-group consultation in an interactive way. Specific evaluation formats could be used, for example asking the children to give marks to the different evaluation questions on a scale of 1–5. Another option was to ask children to stick smileys/faces on the different questions and give feedback in comments.

The children's rights game

The game is based around 25 cards. Each card depicts a children's right in the form of a traffic sign. There are 14 real children's rights as laid down in the UNCRC and 11 fake rights. Each card is printed on both sides: one has a traffic sign with text and the other shows a traffic sign without text. The real and the fake rights are listed below. The 14 UN CRC rights were selected in collaboration with the partners involved, taking into consideration which rights would be most relevant and close to the personal lives and experiences of the different groups of children that would participate. The selection was limited because it would have been neither feasible nor conducive to fruitful discussions with the children to look at all the UN CRC rights. The children had to choose which rights they thought were 'real' and which were 'fake' and indicate the reasons for their choices. After the children had played the game and were familiar with their various rights as children, they were asked as a group to select the four rights that they felt were most important and most relevant to their lives and situations. To get a consensus on this was not always easy for the children as they often felt that more than four rights were important. The children's rights game served as a catalyst for a range of in-depth discussions. Although it did not provide strictly comparative data, it did provide a common frame for the children's answers. The four selected rights were discussed in more depth and the children could use different ways to express their feelings and experiences, such as interviews, group discussions, paintings, drama, etc. Creative activities were often used to enable children to express their experiences and ideas

Real children's rights	Fake children's rights
All children are equal *(Article 2 UN CRC, the right to non-discrimination)*	Every child has the right to visit the moon once in his/her life
Disabled children have the right to special care *(Article 23 UN CRC, the right of disabled children)*	
Children have the right to information *(Article 17 UN CRC, access to information)*	Every child can curse if he or she wants to
All children have the right to health care *(Article 24 UN CRC, the right of children to health and health-care services)*	No child should have to do the dishes
All children have the right to education *(Articles 28, 29 UN CRC, the right to education)*	Every child has the right to choose what time to go to bed at night
Children in conflict with the law have the right to special assistance *(Article 40 UN CRC, administration of juvenile justice)*	No child should have to clean his or her room
Refugee children have the right to special assistance *(Article 22 UN CRC, right to special protection to refugee children)*	Every child has the right to belch at dinner
Children have the right to express their own opinion *(Articles 12, the right to participation)*	
All children have the right to play *(Article 31 UN CRC, right to play)*	Every child has the right to breakfast in bed
Children without families have the right to special protection *(Article 20 UN CRC, protection of children without families)*	Every child has the right to have a funny neighbour
No child should be maltreated *(Articles 19, 34, protection from abuse and neglect; protection from sexual exploitation)*	Every child has the right to dye his/her hair
Children have the right to an identity, including a name, nationality and family ties *(Article 8, right to identity)*	Every child has the right to drive a lorry
Children of minorities or indigenous populations have the right to enjoy their own culture *(Article 30, right to practise your own culture)*	
Children have to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty *(Article 37, right not to be punished in a harmful way and prohibition to be deprived of liberty)*	No child should have to do homework for school

Strengths and limitations of the research methodology

The methodology, including the game with fake and real children's rights, proved to be a successful way for children to learn about their rights. The Speak up! project showed that children in vulnerable situations could be involved in participatory activities. What is required is a good methodology, such as creative activities that appeal to the specific group of children and encourage them to participate. Participating needs to be fun and relevant for the children. In addition, the programme, the environment where the children are meeting, the time, and the facilitators all have a crucial role to play, according to the children in their evaluations of the meeting. It should be noted that most facilitators already knew the children before the consultations. The consultations showed that researchers need to be sensitive, not only to what the children talk about but also to what they do not talk about. Sensitive issues that affected children's lives did not come out in all of the children's consultations, and a mixed picture can be seen in the project. For example early marriages, which is an issue for Traveller girls, were not brought up by the Irish Traveller girls. However, the Roma children in Bulgaria did discuss this. The experience of living in the streets was not brought up by any of the children, although the facilitators were aware that some children sometimes spent their nights on the street. If not only focus-group consultations but also individual interviews had been used, the children might have told even more about special issues of importance to them.

Methodological experiences

There is a need to strengthen awareness and recognition of good practice in children's participation. The game on children's rights is not just a game. It is a research tool and a means to teach both children and adults about children's rights. It is a game in that sense that you can have fun playing it, but it relates to experiences that in reality are not a game. A methodological experience from the study is that although the children came from different groups they all discussed their experiences from the framework of children's rights after learning about children's rights in an enjoyable way. So the children in all groups related their experiences to UN CRC – the same frame. The

enjoyment of playing the children's rights game made it a good way to create a relaxed atmosphere and begin a session that over the course of the next few hours would involve talking about the children's everyday life, serious experiences and lack of support. In handling the variety of experiences within groups in different vulnerable situations or ordinary situations, and from different countries, it was important that all the children related their situation to the same framework of the UN CRC and that all of them had some knowledge of this framework.

CONCLUSION

A conclusion made by the facilitators in the Speak up! project was that children should not be viewed as passive vulnerable victims but as social actors in vulnerable situations. It is important that they are listened to and receive the support and protection they need to be able to speak up. Children in vulnerable situations can be consulted in small focus groups which, depending on the children's background, can include creative elements and energizers. They can take place during a residential weekend or in smaller separate meetings. Small groups make children feel safe and listened to, enabling them to open up. However, it is noted that the children did not always speak about issues close to their daily experiences.

The children's rights game was used in most groups. This supplied a common knowledge base and a framework for the study. The children expressed their experiences in terms of rights in the UN CRC and the study was in this sense comparative. It is also important to try to ensure that focus-group meetings are fun and that the children have various opportunities to express themselves .Central to the children 's narratives was that they learned about their rights as children in an entertaining way and could relate their experiences or lack of experiences to the UN convention. Various articles of the Convention served as a common frame work for analysis ,making it possible to compare the experiences of groups of children from different countries and in different situations.

A further tentative conclusion is that the focus-group meetings could have been combined with individual interviews to allow the children to be more open about their inner feelings and achieve different outcomes. It turned out that many of the children who participated had never felt listened to and taken seriously before. This was the first opportunity for them to speak up. A combination of methods might therefore result in more effective and meaningful participation for some children.

In playing the children's rights game, the children learned about their rights. It was the first time many of them had heard about children's rights. It was a learning experience for both groups, the groups with children in vulnerable situations and the control groups, in particular when it came to linking the rights to their own lives. The children's rights game contributed to this learning process. The project shows a need to provide children's rights education to children as well as to professionals working with children, so they can inform children about their rights. Children in vulnerable situations or with special needs have the same right to be taken seriously and to be listened to as all other children. They may often need to be protected to be able to speak up, but never protected from being able to speak up.

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1.The research was funded by Eurochild and the European Union's Fundamental Rights & Citizenship Programme.
2.This framework is based on the Eurobarometer Surveys on the Rights of the Child in 2008, 2009 and 2010. The latter included focus-group consultations with children aged 15–18.
3.The game was developed by Defence for Children International/Netherlands (DCI/NL).It was further elaborated by Eurochild in the Speak up! project and afterwards at Mälardalen Research Center, www.MRC.se.
4.Developed by Elinor Brunnberg, Professor of Social Work, Mälardalen University, Sweden (see Brunnberg, 2013).
5.Developed by Daniel Stoecklin, Professor of Sociology at the Institut Universitaire Kurt Bösch and Institut International des Droits de l'Enfant, Switzerland.

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