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# Giving children a voice through partnership: a child rights-based approach to the co-design of postgraduate nurse education.

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**“Partnership working with children and young people: Embedding children's rights in post graduate nurse education to influence students in their future practice”.**

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**Abstract Aim:** To raise awareness of the importance of Children’s Rights through embedding them in postgraduate school nurse education to influence school nurse service delivery.

**Background:** There is an increasing need for the voice of children and young people to be more evident in planning, designing, services including the delivery of higher education for school nurses to ultimately influence service delivery.

**Method:** A model was developed through direct partnership with representatives of the Children’s Parliament in Scotland. This model facilitated the inclusion of children and young people’s opinions in the co-design of postgraduate nurse education in order to incorporate children and young people’s rights and opinions and improve the delivery of the school nurse service in Aberdeen.

**Results:** In a supported environment, children and young people were able to negotiate relationships with multiagency professionals on an equal basis, building connections and trust with them in partnership, based on their perceptions of school nurses’ daily actions and characteristics. Their negotiation of relationships identified various change management categories for improving the delivery of higher education and services.

**Conclusion:** It is evident from the model outlined in this article that children and young people have clear opinions and views when consulted in an inclusive age- appropriate way through rights-based participation. It is important that listening and taking due cognisance of children’s voices becomes the norm in influencing higher education, and that children and young people have direct influence on improving children’s services

**Key Words:** Children’s Rights; Postgraduate Nurse Education; School Nursing; Partnership Working; Co-Design

## Background

Historically, children and young people have been “marginalised, isolated or ignored in public health and social policy debates” (Toby 2006). Consequently, there is a need for the voice of children and young people to be more evident in planning, designing, and delivering higher education to influence children’s services.

Every nation of the UK has agreed to adopt the principles of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (House of Lords et al, 2015). Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to express their views and that they should be considered in relation to matters that affect them. The UN Committee is clear that participation must be ongoing and consistent, must try to gather representative views and not be tokenistic. Implementation of the UNCRC differs across the UK, with the devolved countries of Wales and Scotland having enhanced its status by incorporating it into law (House of Lords et al, 2015). This article concentrates on the Scottish perspective, with the principles above having been applied to the innovation outlined.

A key element in promoting children’s rights and responsibilities is a move towards better engaging children and young people in decision making about their lives (Scottish Government (SG) 2018). Governments and staff involved in all aspects of child healthcare including higher education are expected to initiate ways of working to not only promote children and young people’s rights, but ensure this client group have a voice in all aspects of their life, including services that affects them. The United Nations Charter of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), outlines the underpinning framework to empower children and young people. In response to this, the SG introduced legislation that began initiatives such as Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), (Scottish Government 2012), Children and Young people’s Scotland Act (2014) and The Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Act 2019). The aim of such legislation is to support children and young people to grow up feeling loved, safe and respected. For children and young people to do so, they need to be supported to understand their rights so that they are confident, when engaging with the people and organisations that affect their lives and to hold them accountable.

The aim of this article is to raise awareness of the importance of embedding children’s rights in postgraduate school nurse higher education and, importantly, school nurse service delivery through working in partnership with children and young people. It outlines a model for effectively involving children and young people in the co-design of higher education for nurses and improving delivery of the school nurse service.

The initiative outlined in this article took place in 2019-2020, utilising a rights-based methodology to influence the design and delivery of school nursing, higher education and health service delivery. This methodology was grounded in the UN (1989) CRC, a set of internationally agreed legal standards that lay out a vision of childhood underpinned by dignity, equality, safety and participation. Taking a child rights- based approach in this context meant using the UN (1989) CRC as a practical framework for working with and for children and young people. The goal of this approach was to promote and secure the full range of a child’s human rights. The focus was on partnership co-design including children and young people, which followed the tenets of the UN (1989) CRC and provided an effective way to address how academic practice education and professional practice are designed and delivered. In addition, and most importantly, the process informed postgraduate school nurse students and other practitioners involved in the project about what children and young people perceive they want from services upholding the Quality Assurance Agency (2018) and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018) quality assurance frameworks. Moreover, this approach further supported progressing the legal status of human rights (SG, 2014), including the right of all children to be able to access health services to meet their needs through the design of higher education for school nurses. Furthermore, it upheld the component of the UNCRC that states that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and that their views should be given due consideration in accordance with a child’s age and maturity.

## **An Aberdeen City Children’s Rights Approach to What Matters to Children and Young People.**

“Imagining Aberdeen” began in 2016 when 300 children from various primary and secondary schools were brought together to imagine how Aberdeen City could be a city where children are healthy, happy and safe. From this work a self-identified group of children became “Imagineers” and were supported to identify and capture ideas and messages important to them through art and video. The “Imagineers” eventually became a smaller group of 40 children, aged 9-13 years. They connected with multi agencies to influence the design, planning and delivery of future children’s services. From 2016 to 2019 the “Imagineers” identified four main themes they had identified as important to them which they wanted to investigate. These were mental health, early years and families, transition to adulthood and attainment. They went on to share their vision of what these themes meant to them with “Imagineer Champions” who were multi-agency key personnel from Robert Gordon University (RGU), Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Aberdeen City Council, and Police Scotland (North East).

The “Imagineer Champion” role was to participate in facilitated multi-agency workshops and listen to the Imagineers, taking cognisance of what they said. The expectation of “Imagineer Champions” was that they share what they had heard with their agencies and take direct action so that tangible improvements across the identified themes were made for children and young people across Aberdeen City. Through the “Imagining Aberdeen” programme process, the Imagineers identified mental health and wellbeing as one of the main issues that they wanted to influence. They spoke positively about the role of the school nurse as someone they felt that children and young people can turn to when they need support.

### **The school nurse role**

The school nursing service provides a universal and targeted service that is accessible and non-stigmatising, aiming to be acceptable and accessible to families and communities (Emond, 2019). An important role of the school nurse is identifying abuse and neglect in children through partnership working with multi professionals and agencies. School nurses have a vital role in contributing to mitigating health inequalities and the short- and long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences, which can reach into adulthood, negatively impacting future life chances leading to inequalities (NHS Health Scotland 2019). In 2013, the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) of Scotland recommended the school nurse role be refocussed concentrating primarily on ten priority areas (Chief Executive Letter (CEL 13) 2013). The overarching headings are vulnerable children and families, mental health and wellbeing, and risk-taking behaviour, with a focus on child protection. A referral process was outlined by the SG, based on ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’, a principle that indicated an individual child’s needs and referring them through a multiagency meeting. The outcome of these meetings includes signposting or referring for additional support from various multi-agencies or professionals, supported by an agreed Child’s Care Plan.

A pilot was carried out investigating the impact of a refocused role for school nurses. The project focused on the new pathway outlined by the Chief Nursing Officer (SG, 2013). Findings from a review of this pilot indicated that the targeted refocused role for school nurses was viable but only when separate immunisation teams were introduced as well, as a result of the workload of immunisation programmes, which were historically delivered by school nurses (Lawrence et al, 2017), such as in Aberdeen City HSCP. Importantly, the report identified that the mental health pathway was most frequently accessed by children (SG, 2017). These findings correlated with what the Imagineers identified as most important to them, highlighting an RGU Imagineers Champion as someone they felt could support and empower them to get their messages shared. The Imagineers’ collective short-term aim was to influence the delivery of school nurse higher education to concentrate on

children's rights, mental health and wellbeing, as well as inform future practice through co-design, which included the Aberdeen City HSCP school nurse service. The long-term aim was to mainstream (Tobin, 2006) a children's rights-based approach to children and young people's healthcare. The Imagineers' messages to Imagineer Champions were clear (**Figure 1**).

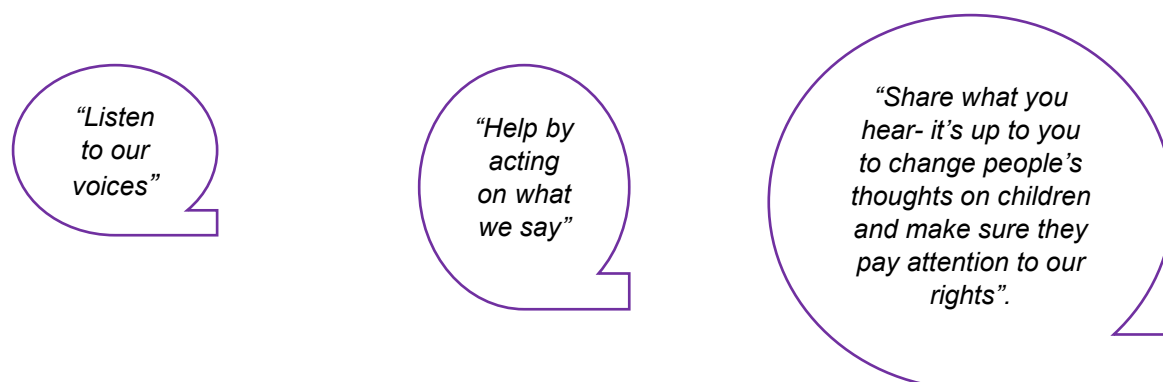


Figure 1

### Sharing the Message

Taking due cognisance of these messages, Imagineer Champion, Dr Elaine Allan RGU organised further workshops, in partnership with the Imagineers, colleagues from RGU, The Children's Parliament Scotland, ACHSCP School Nursing Service, and Aberdeen City Council to support and promote action to share the message, improve understanding and embed a children's "rights based" into higher education and the school nurse service. Representatives of the Children's Parliament facilitated the workshops and gained consent from parents for children's participation. In early January 2020, the Imagineers "built" their perception of their ideal School Nurse through art work. Visual representation was a useful way to listen to children and young people and captured their thoughts, perceptions and emotions (Clark, 2005a,2005b; Dockett & Perry, 2005a; Punch, 2002; Veale,2005). From these representations, five themes were identified: children and young people's emotions, mental health and wellbeing, being listened to, being respected and bullying.

### Visual representation of emotion

Representation of Imagineers' emotions were collated by visual (posters) and auditory modalities (storytelling as voice) in three different workshops. The Imagineers were provided with pens and paper to draw images of school nurse (s) to describe their various feelings in the form of emotional codes in colour, shapes, size, pattern, texture and (descriptive) words in their posters. Visual representation of school nurses through poster designs were used for modelling a diverse set of visual cues from the Imagineer's own emotions ranging from positive, natural and negative feelings related to their own stories. The representations embodied conversational agents and enhanced interactions through continuous emotional engagement between the Imagineers, RGU Champion and school nurses in a supported environment (Lin et al., 2018). The emotions children feel in these situations can be very complex, however visual representation of emotions allowed collation of the diversity of these emotions in the form of written words and drawings. During these workshops, the Imagineers were initially asked to discuss their emotions and perceptions of school nurses in a group activity. This allowed them to describe their emotions, perceptions and representations in the form of shape, colour and size in the posters that were produced (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2

Within these illustrations, it became clear that children and young people can play a crucial role in influencing, co-designing and enriching post graduate educational experiences for nursing students, health services, families, schools, and the community. In a supported environment children and young people were able to negotiate relationships in partnership. These relationships were based on children and young people's perceptions of the school nurses' daily actions and characteristics, demonstrated in "Imagineer" posters. Their negotiation of relationships, which involved building connections and trust on an equal basis with multiagency professionals, allowed the Imagineers to feel that they could openly share their thoughts on the changes they wanted to improve education and services. They identified various change management categories as keywords for improving the delivery of higher education and services, (Tables 1 & 2). Consequently, from the Imagineers perspective, they themselves gained additional skills from being respected, building trust, managing emotions and further understanding their rights, in a safe, fun environment. This can raise children and young people's confidence, as they feel listened to through emerging team dynamics, supporting personal, social and emotional development (Durlak and Weissberg 2011). As the Imagineers drew, attention was paid to their understandings and stories. This process was captured on video and included the adult-child relationship and Imagineers perceptions of nurses' actions and characteristics. The Imagineers outlined what they felt nurses need to learn and know about to support children and young people. The outcomes then influenced and informed co-design and delivery of higher education through production of a video. In addition, a report was produced entitled: "Imagineers Investigate: thinking about what we need from our school nurse". The process of producing this video is now outlined.

### **Imagineers Investigate:**

Thinking about what they need from their school nurse, the Imagineers wrote a letter:

*Dear school nurse,*

*Nurses should be calm, loving and kind to the pupils. It is important that you are optimistic, joyful and can always offer moral support. You should speak to children and listen. School nurses should learn more about emotions, so they can help children if they need it. You need to be at school more and you need to have time to talk.*

*The Imagineers*

This letter outlined the qualities and characteristics that Imagineers perceive as valuable in school nurses. The verbs used are profound and important in terms of education, recruitment, service provision and supporting nurse wellbeing in the NHS. Imagineers then went on to describe their perceptions of the school nursing service and what makes a quality school nurse (**Tables 1 and 2**).

**Table 1 – “We have been thinking about a great school nurse”:**

<b>They think:</b> Children are great. Children are clever. Children are cool. Children need my help and I can help them. Children might feel a bit left out and worried if no one is playing with them or speaking with them. If something bad happened in their life or family are fighting and arguing, children might feel worried.
<b>They say:</b> Don't worry. You'll be ok. It'll be fine. You are amazing. Love yourself. Don't be stressed. Don't smoke. Eat healthy. You are amazing the way you are. Try to stay calm. You matter.
<b>They feel:</b> Carefree. They make pupils feel good. Excited to come to school. Happy. Sweet. Great (because they eat a healthy lunch). Loving. Joyful.
<b>They know:</b> Emotions. How important it is to give children time. Children are delicate. How to calm children down. About fresh food and first aid. How to treat children with kindness. They need to know about each child. How treat children well, make them healthy and not feel left out.
<b>They do:</b> Play with pupils. Offer moral support. You see them around school most days. If you get hurt, they help. They aren't rude or mean. Respect pupils like a family member. Listen to you. Help you. Make the school give fresh and healthy food. Treat you nicely. Support the school. Are kind and loving. Try their best. Help you if you feel left out. Make you happy



**Table 2 - Important messages from the Imagineers investigations:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children want to tell a trusted adult their worries, but they don't want this person to tell other teachers and professionals what they have shared. There should be trusted adults to speak to in private without the worry of it being spread</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bullying gets in the way. Adults may say that it's just a joke and that the child that is being bullied is just overreacting and taking it too seriously. Bullying stops children going to school. Bullies need to understand the pain they put you through. Bullying and racism can stop children from being able to do their best and take part in the activities they want to.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sometimes adults aren't good to talk to because they always think you need help or try to make it better instead of asking how you are and talking about your feelings. Adults usually just want to fix the problem and what children might want is somebody just to listen and be there for them.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children need time spent on them and to be listened to. This makes them feel valued.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make sure all children get enough to eat.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Behaviour is communication. Adults need to understand this instead of punishing and shouting.</li></ul>

The report outlining the Imagineer's work was compiled & shared with RGU management, Aberdeen City HSCP, the School Nursing Team and Aberdeen City Council. From discussions it was agreed that that it was important to explore how a children's rights approach from a child's perspective could be embedded in higher education. In partnership with the "Imagineers", further workshops were organised by the RGU Champion supported by all partner agencies.

## **AIM**

The aim of the workshops was for RGU and Aberdeen City HSCP school nurse representatives to enable the participation of children and young people through a rights-based co-production model to influence the design of postgraduate, higher education and school nurse services. It was also to put children and young people's healthcare rights at the heart of teaching and service delivery through listening to representative voices of children and young people. This meant hearing directly what they need from school nurses and what skills they perceive school nurse postgraduate students learn during higher education.

Three workshops that took place were all facilitated by the Children's Parliament Scotland.

### **Workshop 1:**

The first workshop was an introduction to what school nurses, student school nurses and children's nurses should do, know and say, how they should think about children, and how they should make children feel.

### **Workshops 2 and 3:**

The aim of the second workshop was for children and young people to share their vision and artwork from workshop 1 with the RGU representatives and school nurse team to find out if the Imagineer vision reflected the subjects included in school nurses' higher education, how school nurses perceive they deliver their service and how it can be

improved. Themes were collated from the workshops with matching themes and suggestions for improvement identified (**Tables 3, 4 , 5 and Figure 3**).

**Table 3 - Matching Themes**

**Table 4 – Improvement Themes**

<b>School nurses and school nurse students should:</b>	We need more school nurses
Love children and their job	We sometimes don't know we have one to go to because they are in different schools
Be fun to be around	We need to see school nurses more in school
Show that they are confident in helping children and young people	We want to know how school nurses know about us
Understand it is important to listen to children and young people	We want to know who you are as people
Feel it is important that they try to help Children and young people	We want to play more with school nurses
<b>Know - Learn</b> About Children's Rights	We sometimes don't see them in schools
About CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 'S health and wellbeing especially mental health and wellbeing, allergies, asthma.	We sometimes don't see them in assembly
That children have emotions and about how to help children deal with them	We don't always get stickers
It is important to keep children safe and how to do this and understand Children's Rights	
It is OK for children to feel the way they do, and will help if they are worried, and help build their confidence and keep them calm.	
<b>Think that-</b>	
Children are Important	
Children can trust them	
Children should be respected	

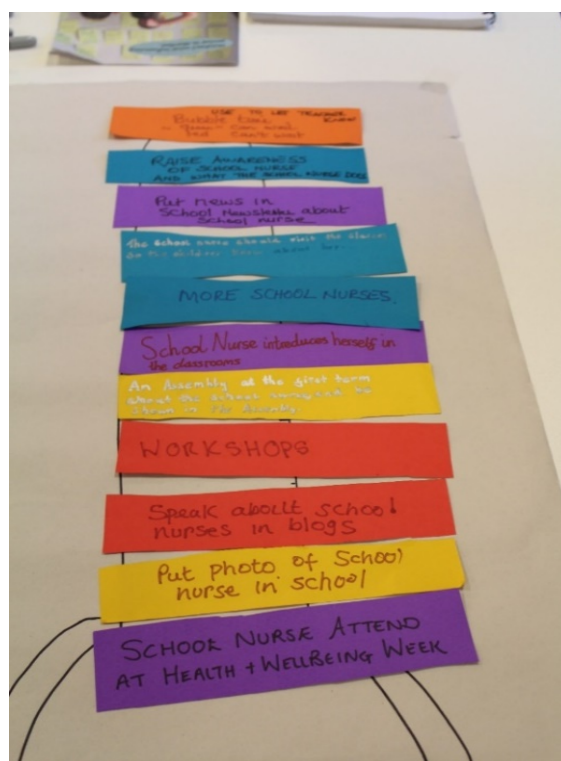
In response, the RGU representatives and Aberdeen City school nurse team met with the Imagineers for Workshop 3 in late January 2020 to share ideas on how to improve the delivery of school nurse higher education and visibility of school nurses within schools (**Table 5**).

RGU representatives and the school nurse team listened and planned to act upon the children's ideas, where possible, and report progress back to the Imagineers. Themes from Imagineers about what they need school nurses to learn about and what they need from school nurses are outlined in **Table 6**. RGU representatives and school nurses provided feedback in response to these messages (**Box 1**).

**Table 5 - Workshop 3: Emerging Themes; What could school nurses do to improve services?**

Put photo of the school nurse in school
Provide a more visible timetable on the SN room door of when the school nurse is in school
Wear NHS lanyard that says <b>Nurse</b> so it is easily visible and identifiable
Lobby for more school nurses
Speak about school nurses in blogs and newsletters
Use "bubble time" to let the teacher know that a child wants to go see the school nurse and if it is a Green issue- It can wait, or a Red issue – can't wait
Deliver a presentation at first term assembly about the school nurse and how to make contact
Raise awareness of the school nurse and what the school nurse does
Visit classes to tell children she is there and introduce herself
Have workshops with the children and young people
Have health and wellbeing workshops
Put news in school newsletter about the school nurse
Tell children a bit about themselves and what they like to build a relationship
Have fun activities
Have more visible leaflets in schools with School Nurse name and contact on it
School nurses invited into class/school and the pupil council
Be that one person to wear funky clothes

**Figure 3**



**Table 6 - Themes from Imagineers to School Nurses**

<i>"School nurses should be calm, loving and kind to the pupils."</i>
<i>It is important that you are optimistic, joyful and can always offer moral support</i>
<i>"We need you to say it's Ok to feel emotions, you don't have to hide them in a bottle and wait for them to explode out "</i>
<i>" ... need to believe that we can trust (professionals)"</i>
<i>"Be there for the kids, be there to help"</i>
<i>" You should love your job.....because children can pick it up if you don't"</i>
<i>" you should put a lot of energy into your job because children take up a lot of energy!"</i>
<i>" they need to be kind and considerate"</i>
<i>" cracking a joke can make a day better "</i>
<i>"They are there for everyone, respect everyone, and are really trustworthy"</i>
<i>"They will keep a secret and not just go on to someone else ...they will remember and come back to you"</i>
<i>"They will care about your mindset and care about how you feel, how you really feel and not how you want to feel"</i>

**Box 2: Feedback from RGU representatives and school nurses:**

<i>"I loved the positive outcomes from the Imagineers visit".</i>
<i>"It was really insightful to hear their visions for the future and link it to children's rights"</i>
<i>"It has reminded staff how exciting the future could be and that if we work together and make small changes we can improve outcomes for all."</i>
<i>"It was motivating to work in partnership with the Imagineers"</i>
<i>"We need more workshops like this"</i>
<i>"I will definitely be introducing the improvements suggested by the Imagineers!"</i>
<i>"I feel energised from the enthusiasm created by the Imagineer workshops"</i>
<i>"The experience of listening and acting on perception of the Imagineers is one of the most valuable I have had in in influencing higher education design"</i>

**Agreed actions and outcomes**

The artwork and outcomes of this work has influenced the delivery of higher education within RGU via the co-production and development of a video training resource included in the school nurse online module, which can be found at:

<https://medialibrary.rgu.ac.uk/player?autostart=n&fullscreen=ywidth=835&height=505&videoid=Be9G5qGF&captions=n&chapterId=0>. This will highlight and strengthen postgraduate student school nurse's knowledge of children and young people's rights, which can be applied to practice & service delivery.

As already discussed, supporting mental health and wellbeing was identified as being particularly important to the Imagineers and is also included in the RGU school nurse online module. It includes the messages from the children and young people who wanted student school nurses to take a holistic approach to mental health, and anxiety, having stressed the

ways in which different aspects of children and young people's lives work together to influence it. They emphasised the interaction between feeling happy and how this was reinforced by approval from others in their social networks, doing well in school, and being liked by others. Individual stressors and day-to-day anxieties were viewed by children and young people as part of growing up and they felt that, given adequate support by school nurses, they could deal with these. The converse was equally evident: social isolation, combined with difficult interaction with peers, family and teachers could trigger negative feelings and in turn could exacerbate feelings of poor self-worth and fitting in. This is an important finding given that children and young people have been isolated during lockdown.

Children's rights and mental health form an important component of the RGU post graduate MSc modules. In addition, all Aberdeen City HSCP school nurses were better informed about children's rights in relation to health and subsequently trained in Let's Introduce Anxiety Management (LIAM), training that was provided by the health service.

## **Discussion**

This type of model can be useful in the future for gathering children and young people's perceptions of what should be included in school nurse higher education and how services can be improved. Children and young people have rights and responsibilities which adults can support by ensuring that children and young people are listened to and heard regarding all aspects in life that affects them. Their sense of wellbeing is key in signalling difficulties in their lives which can be a long-term indicator of future mental health (The Children's Society, 2016).

It is evident from the model outlined in this article that children and young people have clear opinions and views when consulted in an inclusive age- appropriate way through rights-based participation. It is important that listening and taking due cognisance of children's voices becomes the norm in influencing higher education, and that children and young people have direct influence on improving children's services. Not only were children's rights and listening to them important to the "Imagineers", influencing school nurse higher education to ensure mental health and wellbeing was included in module design was high on their agenda pre the COVID 19 pandemic. This need has need been magnified since lockdown (UNICEF (2020), Youth Sport Trust (2020). Townsend (2020) argues that "The rights and needs of children and adolescents have been ignored in the global pandemic crisis". She goes on to state that lockdown has had a profound influence on their mental health and wellbeing, citing social isolation (Gunnell 2020), loneliness (ARC, 2020), linked to depression and anxiety up to nine years later (Polek et al 2020) (in Townsend, 2020). In addition, McManus and Ball (2020) assert that COVID 19 be adopted in the ACE framework.

It is even more important that children and young people's rights underpin all school nurse higher education as outlined by article 3 of the UNCRC. Mental health and wellbeing should also be a primary consideration as we come out of lockdown, it is children and young people's fundamental right to be heard.

This research did have some limitations: the low-resourced parameters in which it was undertaken and the relatively small representation of the school age population as a whole. It did not include children with severe and complex learning disabilities, which would be an important group of children to include in future research and rights-based methodologies.

## **Conclusion**

Nurse higher education representatives and school nurses involved in the process outlined in this article listened, valued and acted on children and young people's perceptions of how school nurse education and the school nurse service in Aberdeen City can be improved. Respecting children and young people's rights is the underpinning

principle for the delivery of online learning within school nurse and children's nurse higher education modules in the RGU.

This paper offers an example of a co-designed model with children and young people at its heart. It is one that could be replicated across higher education establishments, wider health services and multiple agencies to support genuine translation of policy into practice. To paraphrase the Imagineers, it's up to us all, as advocates, to change people's thoughts on children and young people and make sure everyone pays attention to and upholds their rights which can be supported through school nurse higher education.

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