

# Passing the mic

Young people from Living Assessments Expert by Experience Groups on young people's representation in and potential contribution to documentaries

Part of the **Living Assessments** project



*'It comes down to young people not being taken seriously but we need to give young people a platform to share their views and to share their stories!'*

*'I think it's important that you pass the mic to other young people because they have their own stories to share.'*

**Meg Darroch, Living Assessments Disabled Young People's Expert by Experience Group.**

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The television programme 'Up' was recently voted the most influential UK TV show of the last 50 years by the Broadcasting Press Guild. The series, which first hit screens in 1964, followed the lives of fourteen children from varied social backgrounds, documenting their progress every seven years and, in doing so, tracing social and economic developments in British society. The show was so well-known that a significant number of people mourned the passing of Nick Hitchon, a scientist who died of cancer in 2023, and whose life was tracked from the age of seven. The 'Up' series influenced British documentary making and in particular, demonstrated the value of listening to the voices of children and young people as they navigate the complexity of growing up.

In spite of exemplar documentaries like the 'Up' series, we still predominantly hear about and not from children and young people. Dramas and documentaries are written and produced about their experiences, yet their voices are silenced, paraphrased, or ancillary. In particular, disabled and care-experienced children and young people are given little opportunity to comment on practices that directly affect their lives. This report compiles the opinions of a panel of disabled young Experts by Experience,

collected as part of the Living Assessments project and hosted by staff at the National Children's Bureau and the University of Kent. We asked them to reflect on how they felt about current media representation of young people, and what engagement with media by production companies, media executives, journalists, directors and producers should look like.

## Background

Much of the discussion around young people's engagement with the media centres on children's use and consumption of various forms of media. Children and young people's participation in documentaries is contentious as adults are attributed with performative skills, children are still developing social and self-awareness.

There has always been concerns attached to children's exposure to various forms of media. From early cinema to television, anxiety has been expressed about the influence of the screen's content on children's physical and mental health. Divisions between what is appropriate for adults and children are clear in film and television ratings, but are less controlled on social media platforms and the internet, although the concerns about age appropriateness and the impact of young people are principally the



same concerns with various forms of media in the twentieth century – from children viewing pornographic images in magazines, to concerns about violence on the television. The medium may change, but the concerns from adults remain the same.

While the popular belief that young people are unsophisticated and passive consumers of media has been effectively challenged, a recent Ofcom report: Children and parents: media use and attitudes report (2022), highlighted the gulf of knowledge between parents/carers and their children. This report forms part of Ofcom's programme, Making Sense of Media which was set up to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. There have been and still are legitimate concerns about the nature of media, in particular worries about children's increasing use of unregulated, or less easily regulatable, on-line platforms that give them unfettered access to inappropriate content. The Children's Media Foundation's concerns about the shortcomings of the Media Bill being debated in Parliament were brought into the public eye on 21st November 2023. During a speech on the Second Reading of the Bill by the Shadow Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Thangam Debbonnaire

MP articulated these concerns and highlighted the importance of diverse representation in the media:

**'The Government must ensure that the next generation does not miss out on the high-quality, culturally relevant storytelling... These programmes have a powerful influence on a child's development. They provide role models... inspire ambition and encourage social inclusion. They engage participation in national conversations and develop a child's understanding, valuing and ownership of what it means to be British.'**

'Being British' is a diverse experience. Just as the Youth Engagement Impact Study, 2022–23, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) highlighted the lack of diverse demographic representation as a barrier to youth engagement programmes that aimed to empower young people's voices, equally, such diversity must be represented on our screens. In order to fully understand young people's diverse experiences, they must be represented and their opinions heard across social and cultural life, to inform and influence social policies for their futures.



## Context

In this report, young participants from the Living Assessment project's Disabled Young People's and Care Experienced Young People's Experts by Experience groups were consulted on the benefits of young people's involvement in media programmes, addressing the lack of young people's voices in television, and their ideas for developing non-exploitative engagement practices.

This report resulted from discussions in previous group meetings where young people pointed out how rare it was to hear directly from children in the media. Our project bases itself on listening to the voices of children and young people and a commitment to the importance of co-production in research projects that involve young people. As such, we wanted to get their opinion on this lack of representation and what might be done so that diverse groups of young people can be heard.

In order to facilitate discussion, the young people were asked to watch the documentary *Growing Up Poor: Breadline Kids: Dispatches*, where children's voices were central to the documentary.

They were asked to discuss:

- What difference do you think it makes to the viewers of the

programme to hear directly from the children and young people?

- What roles can young people play when documentaries are being devised?
- At what point should children and young people be involved in making documentaries?
- Should they be interviewees or their expertise consulted in other ways?
- How much power do young people have?
- What can children and young people offer to documentaries?
- How do we create programmes that do not feel exploitative?

One young person reflected:

**'It made me realise two things, there isn't enough support for young children whose parents are struggling, that young carers are under recognised...It made me realise that there's different types of poverty, like not being able to play certain games or not being able to do the same activities as your peers, it doesn't have to be material poverty.'**

**'I think what really shocked me with the documentary was seeing how mature some of the young people like that young girl**

whose mother was struggling from depression, how like maturely she spoke and how she understood what was best for her mother and became sort of a carer for her mother and her younger brother. I think it was impactful because you sort of saw a child behaving more as an adult and you sort of, that shows the gravity of the situation, that the child should be allowed to have a childhood and be a child

and it makes you pay a bit more attention.'

'It's quite compelling because they're real life issues and it's people's everyday lives like you're not talking about something that's going to happen in 50 years you're talking about something that everyone's facing... someone might

know someone sat next to them that's going through that or their neighbour next door it makes it more relatable and especially with young people might be teachers social workers there in these fields working with people it helps you pick up the signs a bit easier as well.'



Those individuals that watched the documentary were generally complimentary about the contribution of young people, and some noted that it made them enjoy the documentary more. They also praised two other Channel Four documentaries on Autism, which they revealed they had watched. Born to Be Different is a British documentary series on Channel 4, which followed the lives of six disabled children who were born in the millennium 2003–2020. A one-hour special in 2018 called Are you Autistic? was also popular with the group of disabled young people, and from the comments, represented Autistic people in a way they found appropriate. On the television programme So you think you're autistic? one young person said:

'It showcases two people that are a little bit older, going through the diagnosis process and it shows how autism isn't something that people just get diagnosed with young, it's something that you can be late diagnosed with which I found quite interesting, so it showed a few different things at the same time.'

Our discussion centred around documentaries as the young people believed that they were an



empowering format for young people and a democratic form of broadcast as appearances were open to a potentially wide range of participants. Young people could contribute to a programme without being trained as professional actors. Furthermore, many of the young people found 'true' and immediate stories about individuals more authentic as opposed to professional actors telling a fictitious story. The group felt a documentary focussing on daily life was important and the concentration on exceptional children was less realistic:

**'Every single time there's a child on something like BBC News, the child has done something very exciting, the child has done something very unusual for a child and they get interviewed, the reporter is always just that little bit more engaged and reporting a normal candidate or such like, someone like that.'**

**'it's like if you suddenly found a diamond in the ground, you'd suddenly be very interested in that diamond and you'd be scrubbing it and trying to see what's inside it, and trying to see how the diamond looks and stuff like that. Meanwhile, if you saw a piece of wood on the ground, you'd just step over it because**

**you literally see it's something that's on the ground every day, that hasn't been maintained well enough.'**

In this discussion, young people demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the limits of documentaries, and their capacity to reflect a small proportion of lives on the small screen:

**'It's really important to remember you're only seeing a small microcosm of their life.'**

## **Ethics**

There are regulations regarding children's appearance in newspaper and magazine stories. The Independent Press Standards Association publishes information for parents and individuals who are concerned about articles featuring children, or about the impact of a journalist's behaviour on the wellbeing of a child. The group recognised and presented opinions about ethical questions related to working with young people. They highlighted that ethics were a critical consideration, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics. Ethics were

**'extremely important because they can be in some cases**



subjective, like an action offends one person like a child speaking on TV about a sensitive topic.'

'I would say that especially in the case with the programme that we watched, these children are very vulnerable and there's a lot of ethics behind having to, if we want children to be involved, there's a lot of ethics behind it. Whilst there should be more, we have to also recognise it's quite complex with ethics and things like that.'

Regarding the documentary *Born to be Different*, which 'captured the lived experience of young people with various conditions and their parents', one young person remarked, 'I would definitely say that's an ethical way of capturing the children's voice and parent's voice' because filming of this longitudinal study centred lived experience but was sensitive to the changing situations of disabled young people and consent to film was continually re-assessed.

Several group members stressed the ethical importance of young people being involved in production from the outset, and consulted throughout, to ensure that their priorities are reflected in outputs:

**'If they're involved in the production from the outset, they**

have control over the direction of the show and that will take the show in a different direction, that will refer to the child's opinions and will refer to the child's priorities.'

Another young person noted that:

'You could have co-production as in making sure that even if they're not doing it directly, through every stage their voice is heard [...] if the people want it truly to be for young people by young people, then it needs to be that way'.

The young people felt that age should not be a barrier to participation and that children 'shouldn't be shut out because of age' – it 'doesn't matter how old you are, you have ideas to put in'.

The facilitators asked the group to reflect on what might limit young people's participation in documentaries from an ethical standpoint and how these issues might be managed. Some young people highlighted the need to manage the pressure of being involved in a documentary. Agreeing that 'it's important for young people to be involved in decision making', one member suggested that groups – managed along the lines of the Living Assessments Experts by

Experience groups – would offer a less pressurised way for young people to be involved, and that taking advantage of pre-existing interest groups might be one option:

**'I think kind of linking the programmes to different policy issues that are happening, different campaigns that are running would be helpful so then it's not on the young person.'**

**'I know some of the young people that are in another group that I am also part of, they were part of a programme quite a few years ago and they've got, the wider youth group got consulted on that programme, it wasn't just the people who got chosen to be part of those opportunities so it means it's more representative. For example, us here today represent our own disabilities and experiences and what we're coming here to do as a group but we don't represent every single young person, and I think it's important that you pass the mic to other young people because they have their own stories to share.'**

The documentary environment should be flexible, with a range of formats available in order for participants to feel comfortable and supported. Young people reflected on different



types of media and noted that varied levels of confidence amongst young people should not hinder their involvement. Some young people, the group noted, may be self-conscious and might feel uncomfortable being filmed. They offered suggestions for tackling this using diverse ways of capturing their voices.

For instance, some young people might feel more comfortable telling their story off camera:

**'It's kind of easier for them to voice their opinions when they know their face isn't being recorded'**

They proposed that children and young people could 'help come up with the themes, assist with editing', help 'direct' the documentary, or 'present'. Having different options would allow children and young people to choose if they wanted to be in front of the camera, but it was important to create opportunities for those who did not want to be filmed.

This process needs to be led by children and young people. It is:

**'important to ask each young person what works best for them and follow their lead'**

Mindful of varying capacity for



involvement, it was suggested that play and art-based work can enable participation of different age groups.

While disabled young people are often considered in terms of increased vulnerability, the young people highlighted the benefits of diverse ways of thinking for media involvement:

**'It's kind of easier if you are neurodiverse because you don't really care (\*laughs\*) in my experience you don't really care about messing it up as much.'**

## The role of adults

There was a lot of discussion centred around the role of adults in the process of documentary development. Some group members noted that previous documentaries they watched were usually adults speaking and dictating 'this is how it is'. While it was recognised that adults had media connections and technical expertise when it came to creating a documentary, the young people felt that their perspective, and what they brought to a documentary was equally important, and that children and young people offered a unique set of skills that would benefit the documentary

making process.

**'We [as a society] underestimate how much children take in so maybe it's seen as unnecessary / adults feel the need to protect them but what adults don't realise is children actually realise what's going on.'**

**'Kids are more creative than adults, kids go outside of the box.'**

They noted how important it was for young people to have their own conversations and speak to each other and learn from one another in documentary development or output. This would offer a 'better understanding' and increased 'authenticity':

**'Young people speaking to each other is a good way forward because that's how you learn from people, like you always learn from your friends and people that you talk to as well.'**

They expressed some concern about the influence of parents and other adults on the content, stressing the need to account for and mitigate against such power dynamics:

**'the point is children are quite gullible when it comes to what they say and they can essentially**



parrot what their parents tell them to so you have to take that into account as well.'

'I think also like who makes the decision, the child or the adult, that's really, really complex because yeah, one has to be aware that the child might feel obliged to do it if the parents ask them to and it might not be the child's full decision.'

In spite of concerns about the influence of adults in their depiction of themselves, the young people all agreed on the power of testimony and recognised the importance of who that testimony comes from. The group wanted to stress how much power is contained in the young person's voice:

'I think they do have power but unspoken power, like adults aren't going to admit the fact that we like have power, like you see that in politics when different task groups go and talk to them and that's when it seems to have the most impact 'cause otherwise I think well yeah it may not have impact but if they don't see like the real impact of the impact on the ground then they're not going to do anything about it.'

'I don't really think children know

how much power they have, they're only young so that also doesn't discourage them from actually speaking up about issues because they think their voice is only one small and in reality it's actually really big when you think about it.'

'I think a lot of young people maybe don't realise the sort of power they have because a lot of the time, young people are sort of spoken over a wee bit like a specific example I think of his schools the way young people are taught is to learn by sitting in a classroom and be quiet and be spoken to [...] I think there could be a lot of unrealized power but power that young people don't often get to use and the more opportunities that are created the more impact I think young voices could have in different situations.'

The group regarded one of the obstacles to change as being the attitude of adults, who they see as resistant to change:

'People often will develop ideas, pre conceived ideas about a specific group of young people and it's difficult to change that from an adult's point of view so if the children talk about how it is actually in reality for them



being part of a marginalised group, then that opens their eyes because they realise they're not alone but also the adult's eyes as well, to see how much impact that people's assumptions are having on their lives'

'A lot of young people will maybe be able to bring something up that maybe an adult wouldn't have thought about because it seems obvious but maybe a child will see it as something that like isn't, like could be changed or doesn't have to be the way it is just because it's always been like that I think young people can have very interesting and unique opinions about topics'

'I think young people are very brave as well [...] about asking questions and challenging, I think being brave but also innovation and new ideas but also seeing the bigger picture [...] but also, I feel like young people are really good at that because they don't overthink it too much they just say what's in the forefront of their mind.'

## Ways forward: Recommendations from the group

### 1. Think about the everyday

Young people are interested in people's everyday lives and want less of a narrow and exclusive focus on the unusual or 'exceptional'

### 2. Advisory Board

Set up an Advisory Board of young people for documentaries, which might take the pressure off individual young people who might not have the confidence to directly share their personal experiences, and which will ensure consultation with children and young people from the earliest stages

To ensure this is not exploitative, and that the Advisory Boards are diverse, accessible and inclusive, the role should be a paid position that provides opportunities to young people, such as building industry connections, and training and resources for media production. The young people suggested creating apprenticeships as a way of valuing young people's expertise while developing their skills.

### 3. Consult and listen

Young people's involvement should

start with ideas for programmes and be supported by adults with expertise. Are young people being forced to watch content created by adults and shaped by adult concerns when it is about them? Should documentaries be youth based as opposed to children talking about themes that are important to adults? Should there be a shakeup in programming and which includes a separate genre – young adult documentary and young adult programming?

#### **4. Protect young people but don't try to shield them from the world**

Diverse ethical considerations, such as those highlighted by these young people, must be central to any media engagement with children and young people. By not adopting children's voices into mainstream media, are we limiting intergenerational understanding and encouraging young people to explore their feelings and their experiences on social media such as TikTok where they primarily engage with – and heard by – other young people.



#### **5. Equality and Diversity are central to productions**

Children want to hear from people like them. Recognise diversity and the opportunities it offers – don't silo young people.

Create documentaries which challenge current stereotypes about disabled and care-experienced young people, and which offer positive stories to show that these young people 'are more than our experiences'.



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