



Young People's Comprehension of the Rights Caution in New Zealand

Research Summary

Frances Gaston, MSc in Forensic Psychology

Supervisors: Dr Clare-Ann Fortune and Dr Deirdre Brown

School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington

In New Zealand we have both a child/youth, and an adult version of the Rights Caution, which are the rights read to an individual when they are arrested, detained, or questioned by police. The child/youth version was created with the developmental needs of young people in mind, however, it remains unclear whether it is assisting young people to better understand their rights. No previous research has been completed in New Zealand looking at young people's comprehension of the Rights Caution, however, international research has shown that 1) the majority of individuals under 15 years old have limited rights comprehension, and 2) adapted versions of rights do not increase young people's understanding. In consideration of these findings, we conducted this research with the aim of answering three key questions: 1) Do young people in New Zealand understand the Rights Caution, 2) What level of understanding do they have, and does this change with age, and 3) Is the child/youth version of the Rights Caution helping to increase young people's level of understanding of their rights, compared to the adult version?

Methods:

Participants were recruited from two Wellington region schools ($N = 101$). They were interviewed using *The New Zealand Rights Caution Competency Questionnaire* (NZRC-CQ), which was designed for this study, to assess young people's understanding of the New Zealand Rights Caution. This questionnaire assessed five aspects of Rights Caution understanding: Participant's understanding of the vocabulary used in the rights, their ability to remember the rights after having them read to them, their comprehension of the rights, their ability to recognise the meaning of the right in different scenarios, and their appreciation of the protection awarded by the right. Additionally, participant's initial level of knowledge regarding their rights was assessed by asking an

open, free recall question prior to the interview. Participants were divided into either a 10 to 13 year old age group ($n = 58$), or a 14-to-16-year-old age group ($n = 43$), and were randomly selected to be interviewed using either the child/youth, or adult version of the Rights Caution.

Results:

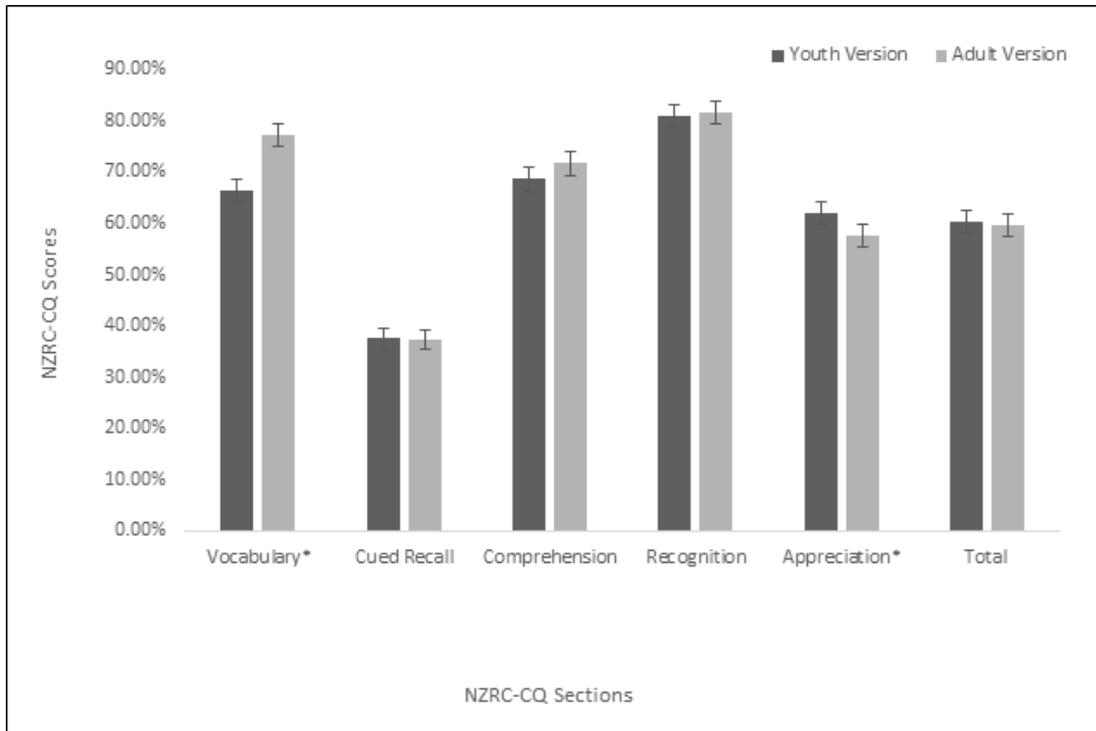


Figure 1. Mean percentage scores for each section, and total NZRC-CQ scores, compared between versions of the Rights Caution, and collapsed across younger and older age groups.

Note: *Sig at $p < .05$

It was found that participants had limited understanding of the Rights Caution, exhibiting a more simplistic understanding of the rights, compared to in depth knowledge around the application of the rights. Level of understanding was not affected by participant's age; the older participants knew as little as the younger ones. Furthermore, it was found that the child/youth version of the Rights Caution did not assist participants in their understanding, and actually contained language that participants found more difficult to understand (as seen by the significant difference in vocabulary scores between the two versions in Figure 1). These findings suggest that the New Zealand Rights Caution may not be effective in providing young people with the legal protection that it is intended to, and the processes around its use with New Zealand youth may need to be revised.