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## Editorial: Student Voice and Children's Rights in Secondary Schools

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**Abstract:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes a clear mandate for children's rights to be afforded across their lives as children up to the age of 18 years, including children's right to be heard and have their views given due consideration in educational matters that affect them. This special issue presents a collection of works that explore articles within the

UNCRC through the experiences of secondary school students in Aotearoa New Zealand. The articles use qualitative methodological approaches, involving “student voiced” methods and covering a broad range of young people’s educational experiences, and are examined within a child rights framework. At times, it is evident that children’s rights are not being upheld, either because of institutional constraints or the need for greater teacher and adult awareness of the way young people think differently about matters that affect them. Across the articles, in spite of all the possible barriers that get in the way of affording children’s rights, or enabling their voices to be heard, young people stand up for themselves and their needs. Student voice is only a starting point for enacting the rights of the child, but it is a critical place to start.

**Keywords:** children’s rights, student voice, UNCRC

### **Introduction**

Take care of our children. Take care of what they hear, take care of what they see, take care of what they feel. For how the children grow, so will be the shape of Aotearoa. – Dame Whina Cooper

Dame Whina Cooper (1895–1994) was a respected Māori elder (kuia) and leader who in 1975, at 80 years old, led a 1100km land march down the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand over Māori land rights. She worked tirelessly throughout her life to fight for the rights of Māori (indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand). Her powerful quote is a reminder that affording children and young people their rights is not optional, and she made this remark long before New

Zealand ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) in 1993.

In recent decades, key influences on teacher practice and educational reforms have been the UNCRC and the growing necessity to ensure that “student voice” informs policy, practice, and research (i.e., Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC). The increased expectation that children should have a deliberate and meaningful say in their learning and school life has meant that curriculum and school reform have shifted to democratic practices and partnership approaches, paving the way for equity in education. However, many children do not know their rights, and teachers are not always familiar with the difference between student voice, or listening to what students say, and their actual rights.

When teachers ask for children’s views on matters that affect them, they are not doing the student a favor. Rather, they are affording children their basic right to have a say (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12). In other words, providing children their rights in education is neither optional, nor invitational.

The UNCRC (1989) underpins all life choices for children up to the age of 18 years, including the right to have a name. The convention’s 54 articles create both clear intent and policy imperatives that all aspects of children’s lives have an impact on their right to live, learn, be themselves, and have the freedom to engage in a society that values them. Within educational contexts, although contemporary student voice initiatives increase the chances of authentic partnership approaches between adults and children, such practices are often conceptualized and enacted at a superficial or tokenistic level.

Combined, the articles in this special issue honor the experiences of children’s rights through the voices of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand who are in their secondary school years. Students generally attend secondary school (also known as high school or college) from school years 9–13, and the age range during this time is typically from 12–13 years (year 9) to 17–18 years old (year 13). Children in New Zealand are legally bound to attend school up to the age of 16 years.

Each article in this collection presents the experiences of young people with regard to aspects of the UNCRC (1989, ratified by New Zealand in 1993). The research was undertaken through an educational psychology training program in which university students (first authors) explored areas important to young people at school. These small qualitative studies contribute to an emerging field of how young people experience their rights as identified by the UNCRC, although as many of the articles note, children and young people often feel silenced, or unheard, in their own schools and communities. Qualitative studies have six key characteristics (see Eisner, 1991) that contribute to the qualitative nature of research, with one in particular worth highlighting here: *the self as instrument*. Being the self as instrument, the first authors within this collection have engaged in in-depth one-on-one interviews with young people to understand what really matters to them within the authors' scope of research. The resultant accounts of these young people's experiences, and the interpretations of when, how, and by whom they are listened to, invite the reader to consider what actions can be taken—individually and collectively—to listen to and act on the views of children. As Eisner (1991) reminds us, “the ability to see what counts is one of the features that differentiates novices from experts” (p. 34), and the authors of these articles have worked toward being able to foreground what counts for these young people.

### **The Collection**

Throughout the collection, the UNCRC is used to determine the level of rights these young people experience in their day-to-day experiences at school. Questions explored include whether young people are afforded the power to have their voices heard and to give their opinions, experiences, and observations on policy and practice matters within their educational contexts. Given young people become reluctant to share their views when they see no discernible change in the practice of those around them, this collection is an attempt to listen to what the participating children have to say about a range of experiences and across a number of the UNCRC articles. It is important to note that they do not represent

*all* children's experiences, or even the experiences of children within their schools, but these accounts are intended to open doors to some of the issues facing their generation in school. Consistent with other work in this area, the collection highlights how young people are not fully aware of their rights under the UNCRC, but they do recognize that adults need to be more aware of how to enact their rights, and ultimately they need to feel "safe" to share their views (Fairhall & Woods, 2021).

Eleanor Morfatt and Maria Dacre focus on secondary school girls speaking out on their rights to have a say in schools. Using Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), they investigate why young people's views are not always heard within the school environment. This study explored female voice through the perceptions of girls in years 9–13 at schools around New Zealand. Their findings highlight that there was little knowledge of their rights under the UNCRC, and that only 2 of 10 participants felt their rights were fully afforded within school.

In the article "Adolescents' Understanding of Their Rights and Experiences of Autonomy," Emma McCluskey and John O'Neill use Article 42 (UNCRC, 1989) to explore children's knowledge about their rights. Despite New Zealand's ratification of the convention in 1993, McCluskey and O'Neill argued that children may continue to have little knowledge about rights. In their article, they show how students may still hold limited and varied knowledge and understanding of their rights, and that sources of this knowledge include inconsistent education at school and television. They also note that rights may not be a common discourse among adolescents.

Amy Owen and Roseanna Bourke, in their article, "Young Persons' Rights to Influence Learning in Their Everyday Lives," focus on informal and everyday learning through the experiences of 10 young people aged 13–15 years. The authors present young people's perspectives and lived experiences of how they make their decisions to participate in activities outside of school, and what learning they chose when not in school. These young people highlighted the importance of relationships and identity in their learning, and particularly of

knowing themselves as an important starting point for understanding their rights. Although students are afforded some decisions at school, the article “Students’ Experience of Decision Making at School” by Catherine Harris and Roseanna Bourke shows how dependent young people are on the willingness and ability of teachers to listen, including providing the supportive and trusting environment to listen to students and then ensure their ideas are actively incorporated into school decisions. Students appreciated opportunities to make decisions with regard to their classrooms and learning specific to optional subjects and extracurricular activities, although the research did show that a lack of knowledge about how and when to express their views limited young people’s active engagement. The findings were analyzed through Lundy’s (2007) framework (the integral need for space, voice, audience, and influence) for enacting Article 12 of UNCRC.

As the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori youth (Rangatahi Māori) have unique perspectives that demonstrate the importance of the collective voice and the whānau (family) context in ensuring well-being. Catherine Page and Sarika Rona explore ideas in their article “Kia Manaaki te Tangata: Rangatahi Māori Perspectives on their Rights as Indigenous Youth to Whānau Ora and Collective Well-Being.” In their research with young Māori children (rangatahi), they show the importance of the students’ connection to life beyond school, and specifically connection with “whānau, ūkaipo, their Māoritanga, and wairua as integral factors that contribute whānau well-being.” This article foregrounds Indigenous understandings and challenges Western views on what well-being means for young people. The significance of relationships is shown, as is the importance that these relationships are underpinned by aroha (deep respect, acceptance, and love) and manaakitanga (showing the respect for each through hospitality, looking out for each other).

Rachael Busch and Vijaya Dharan show in their article, “The Impact of Innovative Learning Environments on Sensory Processing Difficulties: Students’ Perspectives,” the importance students place on learning environments that foster

acceptance of diversity, build relationships, and enable the active participation of students through innovative or flexible learning environments. With the introduction of innovative learning environments (ILEs), these authors explore students' participatory rights under the UNCRC, with a focus on Article 23.1, in enabling students with sensory processing difficulties (SPD) to actively participate in their learning. The students reported a strong preference for ILEs over traditional classrooms, as they created a learning environment that afforded more opportunities to work with their peers. In these students' experiences, social affordances were at times constrained in ways the physical spaces were utilized, without due consideration to their acoustic sensitivities.

Emma MacRae and John O'Neill's article focuses on their methodological approach and decisions in their research on enabling participation in voice research for adolescent children with characteristics of autism. They present the methodological approach employed when working with young people to explore their sense of belonging at school and experiences of inclusion. They specifically looked at this topic from a child rights perspective using the UNCRC as a framework. They argue that children are "experts" in their social world, and therefore have the capability to document the everyday experience of being at school. These young people foreground what facilitates their sense of belonging at school and identify aspects of schooling that need attention. Two key considerations in the design of this study are presented in relation to participant recruitment and the interview process and procedures.

Rachael Franklyn and Vijaya Dharan explore perspectives of students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They highlight the importance of affording children their rights to an education that develops their talents as outlined in Article 29 of the UNCRC (1989). Although research has suggested that some young people with ADHD may not always experience the same academic and social outcomes as their peers, Franklyn and Dharan are interested in these young people's views and experiences in school settings that

might impact on their rights and ability to shine. The participating year 9 and 10 students were diagnosed with ADHD, and these young people showed how attuned to their own strengths they were, as well as to areas in which they needed support to learn. Teachers who can be innovative and creative in their teaching approach were viewed positively by these young people, especially when their teachers believed in them and gave them choice and agency over their learning.

Lucy Morrison and Maria Dacre's article, "The Experiences of Rainbow Students in Relationship and Sexuality Education," explores Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989) and presents the experiences of rainbow students in relationship and sexuality education (RSE). They argue that when these young people experience discrimination in school, their academic outcomes and well-being are compromised. The young people report that discrimination at school could be minimized if Rainbow-inclusive perspectives were included in the RSE component of the health curriculum. In this study the students reported that they wanted to address issues of exclusion and silencing, that interpersonal relationships were pivotal to their learning and wellbeing, and that rainbow topics should be included in school curricula and given more visibility.

### **Conclusion**

This collection shows the diverse ways young people experience life at school, learn within and outside school, and the varying impacts of these experiences. Across the articles, it is clear that student voice is multifaceted and complex, where students make their own decisions and can speak out but at other times need the "space" to be created or opened for them. Establishing dialogue and trust between students and educators is a starting point, but these interactions can mean that adults are likely to be challenged in their own current views, values, and expectations. It also means that when teachers hear diverse views and ideas, particularly Indigenous understandings, they need the skills to be culturally responsive if they truly want to understand and act on student voice



and children's rights. Therefore, the ability to create change in educational systems, curricula, or settings through student voice is only possible when adults and young people stand up for what is right—when negotiated positions between adults and young people are prepared for radical change:

Many state schooling system settings permit only limited choice and decision making by children. However, the history of compulsory education also contains numerous instances of schoolchildren organizing and taking collective action against the wishes of adults on issues that are of concern to them; and of states, communities, and individual schools where radically different schooling approaches have been attempted, both inside and outside the publicly funded system. (Bourke & O'Neill, 2021)

This collection identifies, in part, the ways young people are influencing their educational lives through being afforded a space to have their say, or through actively creating that space, so that others might hear them, learn from them, and change the system *with* them. As Eisner (1991) noted 20 years ago, the point of qualitative educational research is the enhancement of educational practice, and over the next 20 years, children and young people need to be afforded their rights to choose to be partners in this process. The ability to appreciate the world “through children's eyes” allows for multi-voiced understandings of educational issues and solutions, ensuring richness in the diversity of ideas. By understanding and celebrating difference, we can ultimately enhance education for all.

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