

---

International Journal of Student Voice

A peer-reviewed, independent, open-access journal

Pennsylvania State University

---

Volume 10, Number 1

IJSV

Aug 29, 2023

---

**Children's Participation in Decision Making at School: The Perceptions of  
Teachers and Student Leaders**

Alison Smith

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

**Citation:** Smith, A. (2023). Children's participation in decision making at school: The perceptions of teachers and student leaders. *International Journal of Student Voice*, Volume(Number). Web link

**Abstract:** The notion of children aged 5 to 12 years participating in schools' decision-making processes has been the topic of research throughout the Western

world since the 1980s and spans the continuum from individual students having input into decisions that affect them specifically, to a focus on student councils and student leaders. However, very little literature focuses on children's involvement in this decision making, and this is particularly so in Aotearoa New Zealand primary school contexts.

This article reports on research that investigated the ways children with student leadership roles participate in decision making, and involved two principals, 10 teachers, and 29 children in two primary schools. The findings show that where authentic participation existed for children, adults facilitated and organized opportunities for them to be active decision makers in matters that affected them. Conversely, where adults offered contrived or limited opportunities, children had little voice or agency, and authentic participation did not occur. The research raised questions about schools' practices related to children's participation in decision making and found that the nature of these practices reflected adults' views about children's capabilities, the extent to which adults shared control and power, and adults' intentionality in including children in decision making. These findings informed the design of the *Mahi Ngātahi* (Working Together) model of children's participation in decision making in primary schools.

**Keywords:** decision making, student leaders, primary schools, children's participation in decision making, participation models

## **Introduction and Context**

The notion of children aged 5 to 12 years participating in decision making in their schools is situated within the broader context of research that investigates children's voice and agency in education, health, family, and wider community contexts. Formal attention to children's participation in decision making in matters related to their lives can be traced back to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) to which Aotearoa New Zealand became a signatory in 1993. Of particular relevance here is Article 12-1 of the UNCRC:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.  
(United Nations, 1989)

There are no limits to what constitutes "matters" that affect children—topics may be as specific as the right to education or, on the other hand, as broad as children's interest in climate change (Henaghan, 2018).

Aotearoa New Zealand's record in enacting the UNCRC is disappointing, with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child consistently noting in five yearly reports since 1997 that the government's implementation appeared to be fragmented (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1997), professionals working with children were not sufficiently aware of the UNCRC, training was needed for these professionals (including teachers), and the principle of respect for children's views needed to be better promoted and implemented (United Nations Committee on the

Rights of the Child, 2003, 2011, 2016). Although Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools<sup>1</sup> commonly provide opportunities, such as student councils, that are *espoused* to foster children's participation in decision making, the extent to which these children *participate* in decision making and have their views *taken into account* remains unclear.

### **Student Leadership and Student Councils**

The student council is the most common and longstanding forum, and sometimes the only forum (M. Jones & Bubb, 2021), for children to express their views at school (Andersson, 2019). These councils are generally comprised of “student leaders” who discuss what is happening in their school and express their views on what might be changed or improved (Forde et al., 2018; Halfon & Romi, 2019). These students are usually elected by their peers and are often tasked with collecting the views and ideas of other students in order to report to adults or raise matters with which the council is concerned (Mager & Nowak, 2012). As such, they are intended to be representative of wider groups of students (Andersson, 2019) and somewhat mimic the practices of formal adult democratic politics.

Despite the views of some that student councils enact democratic and participation ideals, they are also viewed as an “easy fix” for the problem of providing some form of participation in decision making, and as a result they may be tokenistic (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Wyness, 2018). Establishing a student council to satisfy internal or external demands may mean that some councils are not just ineffective—they may undermine the very values and processes that they were set up to foster

---

<sup>1</sup> Primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand generally cater for children aged 5-12 years.

(Burnitt & Gunter, 2013). Furthermore, in examining the extent to which Article 12 of the UNCRC has been enacted in English schools, T. Jones (2017) found that children had little or no influence on “important matters” in their education, with school councils limiting rather than encouraging student voice. Thus, the authenticity of student councils as student “participation” vehicles remains problematic.

The identification of student council members via election by their peers, usually fellow classmates, is also widely critiqued in the literature. First, a homogeneous group of students—who are perceived to be more articulate, outgoing, and confident; often have higher academic achievement; and frequently come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds—tends to be elected (Struthers, 2016; Wyness, 2015). In short, student councils tend to be constituted by those “who find it easiest to speak more coherently and those whom it may be easiest to hear” (McGregor, 2007, p. 97). Furthermore, teachers can view children whose behavior or attitude does not meet their expectations as having “nothing sensible to say” (Thomson, 2010, p. 811). Such positioning of students may lead to the affirmation of existing student elites who are accorded particular status and privileges not available to all (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Wyness, 2013).

The second main area of critique concerns the actual influence that student councils have. Thomson (2011) noted that student representation is often tokenistic, with “students being *seen* to be involved in school processes, rather than being active partners in change” (p. 25). Teachers may also dictate what children discuss (Struthers, 2016) and whether their ideas will be implemented. In addition, student council

members may be allocated tasks that, while being worthwhile in some respects, are for the most part trivial and uncontroversial, such as fundraising, organizing mufti (casual or dress down) days, and completing tasks for teachers (McMahon, 2012). Thomson (2010) described this approach as the “hijacking syndrome”—“selecting students who say what [we] want to hear, about topics we have decided, in ways that we want to hear and responding in ways that are congruent with what we already want to do” (pp. 819–820). As a result, student councils do not necessarily foster student participation (T. Jones, 2017) and are regularly characterized in the literature as tokenistic and limited mechanisms where children merely practice and rehearse for their future life as adults (Fleming, 2015).

The literature does, however, note that councils can encourage children’s participation and provide activity concerned with democratic skills in a democratic context if *all* children’s voices are heard at some level (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Struthers, 2016). Similarly, student expertise needs to be recognized and facilitated so they can implement the changes that the student body thinks are important and receive feedback from teachers about their ideas and actions. However, these benefits may be highest for the students on the council, rather than the students whom they represent (Andersson, 2019; T. Jones, 2017).

Finally, the literature makes a strong case for the existence of a particular school context and culture if student councils are to be effective—even in schools that take pride in their democratic ethos and activities, councils may still not be sufficiently effective depending on the types of issues with which students are permitted to engage,

the balance of power between students and adults, and the extent to which the school embraces democratic ideals (Andersson, 2019; Solhaug, 2018). As a result, the provision of opportunities for student council members to participate in decision making in schools is still not widely evident (Lundy, 2018), or it exists only in tokenistic measures where “adults’ protectionist agendas” are dominant (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018, p. 121).

### **Methodology**

By investigating the perceptions of principals, teachers, and children, this research sought to critically (a) examine the ways in which children participate in decision making within student council settings in two Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools and (2) explore children’s perceptions of their involvement in these decision-making contexts. The related research questions were:

- In what ways do children participate in decision making within school council contexts?
- What are the lived experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the children in regard to this participation?

This research used a qualitative, case study approach to examining teachers’, principals’, and children’s beliefs and experiences in two primary schools, through 12 semi-structured interviews (with two principals and 10 teachers) and four focus groups (29 children aged 5 to 12 years).<sup>2</sup> Two participatory/visual methods—diagramming and

---

<sup>2</sup> One focus group at Morton Hill School comprised the children aged 5 to 8 years who played a game as a priming activity to familiarize them with the focus group process, so this focus group is not reported here.

ranking, and photo-voice—were used in the focus groups to actively involve the children in the data-gathering process in ways they would likely find comfortable and enjoy.

Written consent was obtained from the adult participants and from children and their parents/guardians following a meeting with the children to explain what would happen in their focus groups and how they could participate. Brief details of each school, named with pseudonyms, and the data-gathering schedule are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Research Participants*

School	Participants	Method
<b>Beacon Point School</b>	Principal	Semi-structured interview
• Large urban school	5 teachers	Semi-structured interviews
• 71% Pākehā students (European/White)	8 children aged 10–11 years; 4 girls and 4 boys	Focus group of student leaders
• High socioeconomic community	8 children aged 10–11 years; 4 girls and 4 boys	Focus group of “deputy” student leaders
<b>Morton Hill School</b>	Principal	Semi-structured interview
• Small urban school	5 teachers	Semi-structured interviews
• 65% Samoan or Tongan students	13 children aged 5–11 years; 6 girls and 7 boys	Focus group of student leaders
• Low socioeconomic community		

The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed, and manually analyzed using an iterative inductive coding approach to sort and code data into categories as these arose. Initially, a large number of categories were identified for each school. Three further passes over these data resulted in 14 categories that were then used to recode all interviews transcripts using MAXQDA, an online qualitative data analysis tool. The use of both manual coding and MAXQDA served to crosscheck the



validity of the coding and enabled identification of main themes as well as noting contrasting and affirming findings.

The findings from each school are presented here, reporting on the adults' interviews first, followed by the children's focus groups.

## **Findings**

### **Beacon Point School – Principal and Teachers**

The principal and teachers at Beacon Point School described their student leadership system as providing decision-making opportunities for children. However, the examples given suggested an “individualized,” solitary role with little mention of children leading or working together or organizing themselves independently of adults. This preference for *not* letting children participate in decision making is reflected in the following adult views of children's participation.

*Yeah, I'm divided. Sometimes I think kids don't know what they don't know ... I think as professionals we actually need to do the decision making ... We have the knowledge, and I need to be persuaded a little bit more that I can rely on kids to actually have more of a student voice. (Brett, Principal)*

*I don't know that we pursue [children's participation] as hard as some schools. I think we could perhaps do more, but I also worry that if you go too far you're asking [children] to make decisions that they're not capable of making. (Mary, Deputy Principal)*

An emphasis on children learning about responsibility and gaining trust through carrying out “jobs” for teachers was also strongly evident at Beacon Point. Teachers told

the student leaders what to do and how and when it was to be done—what teachers perceived as student leadership and decision making appeared to be comprised of event management, organizing and controlling younger children, and complying with teachers' instructions:

*They have all kinds of jobs ... A lot of responsibility, particularly in sporting events ... If junior or middle school teachers need children to help supervise, organize, and that kind of thing, they will call on the leaders. (Mary, Deputy Principal)*

*A lot of their responsibilities do come back to sport ... They're in charge of looking after their [team] ... So basically for the softball which I ran, I just put together a set of rules, these are the rules that you're going to play by, you need to have this many people on your team, this many boys or this many girls ... You need to put together a team. There is the schedule. You'll be playing this [team] on this day, go and organize it. (Paul, Teacher-in-Charge [TIC], Sport)*

Other tasks took children out of their classrooms during school time, including cleaning the staffroom for teachers and buying supplies at the local shops, answering the office phone and ringing the bell, and running assemblies:

*[Being a leader] does teach them responsibility and it is doing things for us, too ... They know they can't let teachers down. (Paul, TIC, Sport)*

*[Student leaders] do office jobs, looking after the office at morning tea, and staffroom cleaning, the dishes, those kind of traditional jobs—going to get the*

*milk and that kind of thing. So they have all kinds of jobs in and around the school. A lot of responsibility. (Mary, Deputy Principal)*

While the student leadership system seemed to have potential for children's participation, the findings indicate that decision-making "space" was very limited as teachers orchestrated and defined what children could do. Children had little choice about their roles as student leaders. Rather, they completed prescribed and repetitive tasks set by adults and largely for adults' benefit, often at the expense of their own learning time. Furthermore, adults' control ensured that children could not use their own initiative or take risks but instead emphasized successful completion of their assigned jobs with compliance and subservience.

### **Beacon Point School – Children (Student Leaders and Deputy Leaders)**

In their focus groups, the children at Beacon Hill School appeared to understand the concepts of "decisions" and "decision making" only as a choice between two alternatives:

*A choice, you choose No or Yes. (Scott)*

*You have to take responsibility for what you decide 'cos it's your choice. (Hettie)*

*It's like there's two paths, and you choose which way to go. (Ryan)*

Similarly, the children only gave very simple examples of their participation in decision making:

*We got to vote about the colors of the tops for singing, purple or aqua. (Tim)*

*We had to learn a poem but it could be any poem we wanted as long as it had a certain rhythm. (Jason)*

*Sometimes we choose who we want to work with in a group, like, who we want to sit with for that thing we are doing. (Ryan)*

Furthermore, when asked why they made decisions at school, their responses suggested that making decisions allowed them to show responsibility, but also that adults would likely make better decisions than children:

*So we learn how to take responsibility. (Chloe)*

*So we can take on commitments and develop our independence. (Tim)*

*We get a say in small matters that we understand. (Ryan)*

*We make small decisions ... [Our teacher] gets to have the main vote, but she lets us have a small vote so we feel like we're actually doing something. (Lana)*

*Sometimes we make bad decisions but the teachers corrects them a little bit so they are good decisions, so we make OK decisions but they make them into better decisions. (Jason)*

When one child began to question whether student leaders made any decisions at all, other children responded by reasserting their status:

*Let's face it. We don't have much say around here. (Tim)*

*Yes we do make decisions! (Ryan)*

*We do so get a chance to say what we want! (Zara)*

*We're the mini 2ICs of the school. (Kyle)*

*We put the kids in line [in sport] and keep them in line. (Ryan)*

In the diagramming and ranking exercise, the children were given circles of three different sizes, were asked to label the circles with people they thought "had a say" in

decision making, and then were asked to arrange the circles to show who had the most say. In this activity, the deputy student leaders' view of participation in decision making again showed an emphasis on "position" in the school: Those who were perceived to have more power and status had more say in decision making than did others. Despite not being directed to create a hierarchy, the children did just that, arranging their circles in a row from "most say" to "least amount of say." They also noted their own status, positioning themselves "above" the general population of children. Similarly, the student leaders group created a hierarchy according to the size of the circles, but they resorted to folding the smallest circles in half and then into quarters when they realized there were only three sizes of circles. These children also seemed to view themselves as more important and with power and status exceeding that of all other children.

The photo-voice activity involved the children in photographing places or objects around the school in which they felt they had been involved in decision making and explaining to me why they had photographed particular things. The photographs initially focused on collaborative artworks where each child had their work included, but then turned to matters about which they were aggrieved. The latter photographs indicated the same sense of unease about their roles and responsibilities that had started to emerge in the focus group discussions—their photos showed where they felt they had *not* participated in decision making, rather than where they had. For example, they photographed the school field to show the location of new temporary classrooms, explaining that these structures significantly reduced their outdoor playing space. They also photographed themselves playing on a new playground built for younger children,

expressing their feelings of frustration that a petition signed by every year 6 child in support of being allowed on the junior playground had been ignored by the principal and teachers.

### **Morton Hill School – Adult Participants**

At Morton Hill School, two students from each class (5 to 11 years of age) were elected to be STUDENT LEADERS. Children can self-nominate and, in some classes, every child had stood for election. Their role mainly involved talking to classmates, sometimes with teacher support, about their ideas for improving the school, which they brought to meetings with the principal and all student leaders for discussion. Being a student leader was regarded by the children as a privilege wherein leaders served other children and advocated on their behalf. The principal described collective decision making and students representing other students thus:

*My idea of children contributing to decision making is around allowing the opportunities ... for them to authentically contribute ... It is not contrived or necessarily planned ... Children know that they actually have the right to be able to express, firstly, their opinion around what is happening in the school, and also that they can do something about it. They've got the power to [change something] that is not making them happy ... I think there is a real emphasis on students belonging, owning, and being able to have their input into the school.*

(Lana, Principal)

For example, a group of children wanted the school to have pets. This idea was brought to Lana at the student leaders' meeting where she facilitated discussion

encouraging the children to think about the planning and actions needed. All classes then voted on the type of pet they wanted, with rabbits being most popular. At subsequent meetings, the leaders discussed how the rabbits would be cared for, how to raise funds for their food, and how to organize feeding and cleaning rosters. Eventually, the school groundsman was cajoled by the children into building a hutch, and the rabbits became a long-standing feature of the school. This example illustrates how Lana and other adults took children's ideas seriously, supported them in bringing their ideas to fruition, and encouraged them to take the dominant role in problem solving. Rather than alert them to all the problems inherent in their ideas, the principal facilitated discussions so children could decide how best to proceed:

*Rather than telling children that "You can't do that" we need to take the stance of "I wonder if you could do that. What do you need to find out? ... What should we do next to get this idea going?". (Lana, Principal)*

When several classes wanted to build a tree house adjacent to the playground, Lana already knew this could not be done because of government height restrictions for playground structures, but she still supported the children to email the Ministry of Education to check the feasibility of their idea. By asking, "That sounds like a really fun thing to have at our school. I wonder who could tell us about whether we could do that or not?", Lana facilitated the children finding out for themselves and learning in a "real-life" way that their ideas were not always going to work with rules sometimes constraining decision making. Children's participation in decision making in this case

was nurtured by encouraging them to adapt their idea to something that could be built within the height restrictions that children would still enjoy.

Opportunities for participation were described by other teachers at Morton Hill School. For example, the teacher responsible for computers in classrooms organized a team of children to assist teachers with moving equipment and ensuring iPads were charged as well as testing apps for teachers. She also wanted to involve the children in future purchasing:

*I would like to involve them more ... in terms of what they would like in their classrooms ... whether they want more iPads and less computers and why ... I try to make it as authentic as possible in terms of "You can make some decisions about our computers" ... They are problem-solvers. (Rosa, TIC, Computers)*

Similarly, the TIC of the school garden ensured that children had a say in their activities. She identified her own role as "gently advising and 'steering' only if I need to" (Annie, TIC, School Garden) as children made decisions about what to plant, what they could cook and how to raise money to improve the garden. The TIC of School-gen, a corporate initiative focused on electricity usage in schools, also ensured the children involved had a say:

*We always start with a plan ... last year they organized a solar disco. That was their organization ... The kids do all that ... They make decisions [about] what is going to be included and how they are going to do it and who is going to do it ... I don't tell them what to do. (Barbara, TIC, School-gen)*

### **Morton Hill – Children (Student Leaders)**



In the focus groups at Morton Hill School, the children also showed understanding of the concepts of decisions and decision making:

*You just talk about stuff and then you make a decision. (Sahil)*

*You have to choose something, and you have to say what you want. (Tilly)*

*When you choose something, it's your ideas, you choose from the options.*

*(Susan)*

The children viewed their role as participating not just in the act of decision making, but in the collective activity of improving the school and helping the principal to achieve goals:

*It's to help her make decisions. (Sahil)*

*Yeah ... she wants to know kids' ideas, not just the grownups. (Sina)*

*And she wants leaders of different ages. (Adam)*

*And we make changes to the school. (Ben)*

The findings showed that these children understood decision making, not just in their ability to define it but also in their descriptions of decision making in action. Their responses closely aligned with those of the adult participants, describing decision making as an agentic, active, and collaborative pursuit. Furthermore, children's interests and ideas were welcomed and valued and children acted and interacted *as children*:

*We have ideas to improve the school. We tell [the principal]. We get ideas from our class about stuff like ... pets—we've got rabbits now. (Tane)*

*We voted on the rabbits. The whole school voted on their names. (Elisapeta)*

*Then we had to fundraise for the food and the cage. (Ben)*

*We try to do the things that we can do. Sometimes we can't do the ideas.* (Sahil)

*We couldn't do the tree house ... It's too high or something.* (Ben)

The children's perceptions were further illustrated in their completion of the institutional diagramming activity. They took time and effort to ensure that everyone at the school, including support staff, other adults, and their own parents were recognized as participating in decision making and accorded a circle. The children positioned the various circles as they undertook the task and then discussed at length how the overall arrangement of the circles should look. After trying several different ideas, the conclusion was reached that "Everyone has a say!", whereupon all of the circles were swept into a pile together. In the photo-voice activity, the children were determined to photograph only those things where *all children* had participated in decision making rather than where *they* had taken a particular role as student leaders. For example, the following comments were made as they photographed a mural depicting children and a human rights message.

*This is for everybody.* (Sina)

*All children have rights at this school.* (Ben)

*They are all equal.* (Adam)

Overall, a "collectivist" viewpoint was evident: These children knew that they "worked" for all children and that what had come to fruition from their work—for example, the school's rabbits—arose from all children's participation.

### **Making “Space” for Children as Decision Makers**

The findings of this research suggest that children were positioned as leaders in very different ways in the two schools, and this positioning affected the nature of their participation in decision making. At Beacon Point School, children’s participation was largely limited to carrying out adults’ instructions and completing tasks, with children being perceived as not having the capabilities and strengths to participate in decision making to any greater extent. Hence, children appeared to lack any authentic decision-making opportunities related to their own interests. At Morton Hill School, on the other hand, adults empowered children to be decision makers. The children were perceived, as Mayall (2013) described, as active, capable participants with important views and experiences. This approach reflected adults’ belief in students as capable and agentic social actors who could make a difference to the school.

The Morton Hill School adults’ belief in children echoed Perry-Hazan’s (2019) notion that “realising participation rights in a compulsory space requires various preconditions and careful thought how to alleviate existing structures of power” (p. 3). The challenge here lies in transforming a compulsory place (school) into a context where children can work comfortably alongside adults who are encouraging, collaborative, and respectful, providing “a more relational approach to children’s participation, recognising the respective roles and positions of children and adults” (Wyness, 2012, p. 435). This idea of space for children is evident in their positioning at Morton Hill School where it was characterized by interdependent relationships between children and adults, where adults stepped in and stepped out as they were needed by

children but also when adults saw that their support might be helpful. The locus of control, however, remained largely with the children in regard to the manner of their participation, as well as in the opportunities to voice their own opinions in a context of decreased adult control.

This space is not only a physical location or a particular role, but also encompasses the “ethical and social dimensions of space, where adult-child relations are interdependent, where this interdependence allows for children to be heard and where children work alongside adults” (Wyness, 2012, p. 437). Although both schools believed that they provided opportunities for student leaders to participate in decision making, it was the more intangible components at Morton Hill School that characterized this practice, including the values and attitudes that adults held about children, the ways in which children were positioned in relation to adults, the intent expressed by adults to include children in decision making, and the extent to which a participation ethos permeated school processes and activities. In such an environment, adults facilitated a space for children’s to participate in a socially just, democratic approach to decision making, a notion also reflected in Wyness’s description of children’s space (2012).

The findings of this study suggest that adults’ positioning of children emerges from adults’ beliefs about the ability of children to participate in decisions about matters that interest them and also the provision of opportunities to exercise this participation. At Morton Hill School, many opportunities for other children’s participation in decision making existed in addition to the student leaders’ role. Adults’ distribution of participation opportunities to children, as well as the redistribution of these opportunities

by children to other children, contributed to children's positioning as capable decision makers with the right to express their views about things important to them. At Beacon Point School, adults presumed children needed structure, hierarchy, and to learn responsibility as "pseudo-adults" in relation to other children. However, the children's needs and interests lay elsewhere with their concerns about playground matters and classrooms taking up field space. As Cook-Sather (2020) concluded, if children's interests are not at the forefront, children will be inevitably positioned as inactive and non-agentive beings without anything valuable to say.

### ***Mahi Ngātahi*: A Model of Children's Participation in Decision-Making<sup>3</sup>**

Three common ideas emerged from these findings, albeit in very different ways: (a) adults' positioning of children, (b) adults' power sharing with children, and (c) adults' intentionality in using practices that involved children in participative opportunities. These three broad ideas are illustrated here in a model (Figure 1) useful for thinking critically about involving children in decision making about things that matter to them at school and how this engagement might be achieved. The model encompasses these ideas in the *pikotoru* (three curves or triple bend), a shape used particularly in the carving of Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, to show the joining of peoples or cultures, reflecting notions of combining and evolving. Thus, each crossover point represents joining in a fluid and flexible way, with the model reflecting the intertwining of three *kete* (baskets) of knowledge. Kete, a traditional Māori basket typically woven from flax is, in more symbolic terms, a holder of knowledge—the three

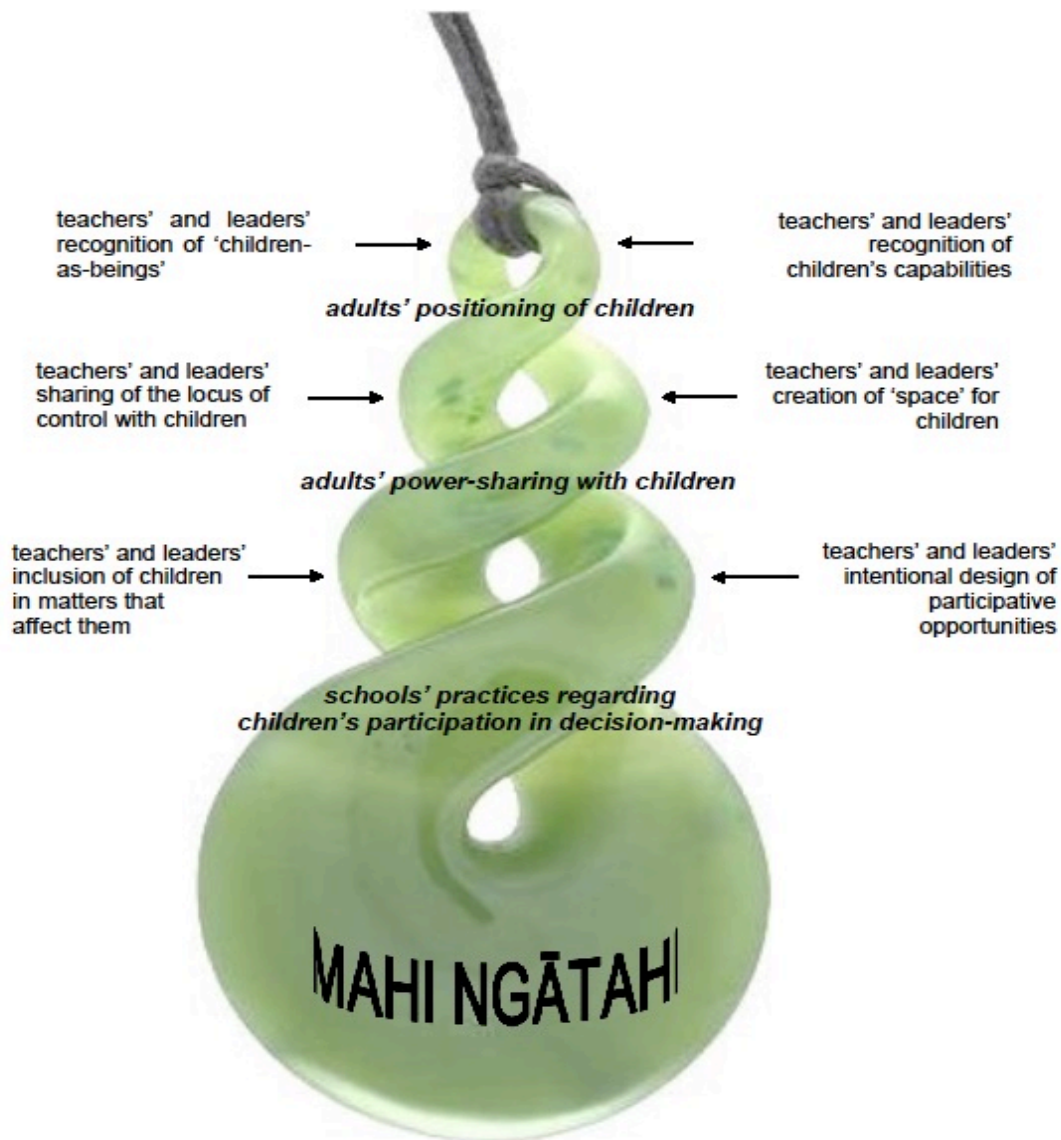
---

<sup>3</sup> *Mahi Ngātahi* (Working Together) is written in the language of the Aotearoa New Zealand Māori (the indigenous people).

kete in the model are holders for each of the three broad ideas listed above. The pikotoru is used here to show not only the intertwining of the three kete relating to children's participation in decision-making, but also to show the relationships *between* these kete in the pikotoru's triple twist. The model thus exists within, and is fundamentally influenced by the bicultural underpinnings of society and education in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as contemporary thinking about children and children's participation in decision-making.

**Figure 1**

*Mahi Ngātahi: Children's Participation in Decision Making*



The first kete, *adults' positioning of children*, emerges from combining the first two strands of the pikotoru: (a) teachers' and leaders' recognition of "children-as-beings" and (b) teachers' and leaders' recognition of children's capabilities. This kete provides the foundation for considering practices relating to children's participation and reflects a major finding from the study regarding the positioning of children. Adults at Beacon Point School positioned children as "becoming" rather than "being" and appeared to actively control children's say in matters that affected them by providing only very limited and somewhat contrived opportunities. On the other hand, adults at Morton Hill School positioned children as capable and competent beings, able to utilize their own voice through the independent yet supported decision-making opportunities facilitated by adults. In this context, adults viewed participation as a child's right and fostered their purposeful participation. Adults were not removed from decision making, but instead they provided an environment for children to "have a voice and the respect from adults that goes with voice but not necessarily all the concomitant responsibilities that go with having a say" (Wyness, 2015, pp. 31–32).

The second kete, *adults' power sharing with children*, builds on (and is strongly influenced by) the first kete, by combining two further strands of the pikotoru: (c) teachers' and leaders' sharing of the locus of control with children and (d) teachers' and leaders' creation of space for children. This kete shapes the ways adults can provide an environment, both physical and emotional, where power is shared in the process of adults facilitating children's decision making. Such redistribution of power allows children to be agentic—that is, children know that they can participate in decision



making and that their participation is likely to have an influence on outcomes. Morton Hill School demonstrated this power sharing by supporting and facilitating children's participation, rather than controlling and mediating the processes and outcomes. The children were able to articulate that their principal wanted their input into her decision making and that she valued children's ideas, not just those of the adults. This understanding was further reflected in the way that the children struggled to position some people as having more say than others in the institutional diagramming activity. At Beacon Point School, on the other hand, adults actively stepped into "adult-oriented institutional forms" (Wyness, 2018, p. 61) that controlled and constrained children's authentic involvement in decision making.

The third and final kete in the pikotoru model, Schools' practices regarding children's participation in decision making, combines two further strands: (e) teachers' and leaders' inclusion of children in matters that affect them and (f) teachers' and leaders' intentional design of participative opportunities. Thus, the model suggests that teachers and leaders cannot design and implement such practices until they have moved through the previous two kete—positioning children as capable and competent beings, and actively redistributing and sharing power with them. Unless the final two strands of Mahi Ngātahi are enacted with intentional strategy and action, schools may find it challenging to enact authentic and appropriate decision-making opportunities for children in various roles and perhaps particularly in the common 'student council' framework.

This final kete at the base of the model is where Mahi Ngātahi can be found. “Mahi ngātahi” may be translated as “one work” or “working together” and is used here to describe where adults and children contribute to decision making through collaborative and complementary roles. In its entirety, the model depicts an approach to children’s participation in decision making that is foregrounded with consideration of all the elements of the model. That is, authentic participation in decision making for children cannot be achieved until these elements are fully understood and embedded in a school’s culture and everyday practice. This model intentionally does not identify individual participation mechanisms or types. While other models (see, for example, Hart, 1992, and Shier, 2001) identify types of participation and arrange or rank them in particular ways, often to imply movement from less “desirable” forms of participation to the more desirable and “better” forms, the Mahi Ngātahi model is intended to provide a focus on what needs to come first before any decisions are made about the ways in which children might participate. It is a framework to guide the development of the specific participation structures that consistently involve and empower children.

### **Conclusion**

Councils and student leadership can be used to give elevated status to some students, to limit voice opportunities to a very small group, to minimize the scope of children’s participation in decision making, or even to just preserve traditional structures and make teachers’ lives easier. On the other hand, such groups can be authentic mechanisms for children’s voice and agency if the kete in the Mahi Ngātahi model are deeply considered. However, Mahi Ngātahi remains an emergent idea in the field of

student participation in decision making. Further research using in-depth semi-structured interviews with a greater number of teachers, leaders, and students across a broader range of schools and participation structures is suggested here in order to more closely investigate the views of each group.

## References

- Anderson, D. L., & Graham, A. P. (2016). Improving student well-being: Having a say at school. *School Effectiveness and Improvement*, 27(3), 348–366.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2015.1084336>
- Andersson, E. (2019). The school as a public space for democratic experiences: Formal student participation and its political characteristics. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 14(2), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197918776657>
- Burnitt, M., & Gunter, H. (2013). Primary school councils: Organization, composition and head teacher perceptions and values. *Management in Education*, 27(2), 56–62.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020613476731>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(2), 182–191.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1705091>
- Fleming, D. (2015). Student voice: An emerging discourse in Irish education policy. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 8(2), 223–242.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197918776657>
- Forde, C., Horgan, D., Martin, S., & Parkes, A. (2018). Learning from children's voices in schools: Experiences from Ireland. *Journal of Educational Change*, 19(4), 489–509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-018-9331-6>
- Gillett-Swan, J., & Sargeant, J. (2018). Assuring children's human right to freedom of opinion and expression in education. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20(1), 120–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2018.1385852>

Halfon, E., & Romi, S. (2019). High-school student councils: A typological approach.

*Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 16(2), 114–134.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919886880>

Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Innocenti Essays

No. 4). UNICEF. [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html)

[participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html)

Henaghan, M. (2018). Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children: Where

have we come from, where are we now and where to from here? In M. Freeman

(Ed.), *Children's rights: New issues, new themes, new perspectives* (pp. 260–

274). Brill Nijhoff. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004358829\\_017](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004358829_017)

Jones, M., & Bubb, S. (2021). Student voice to improve schools: Perspectives from

students, teachers and leaders in “perfect” conditions. *Improving Schools*, 24(3),

233–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480219901064>

Jones, T. (2017). Unsatisfactory progress: Article 12 and pupil participation in English

schools. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 25(1), 68–84.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02501003>

Lundy, L. (2018). In defence of tokenism? Implementing children's right to participate in

collective decision-making. *Childhood*, 25(3), 340–354.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218777292>

Mager, U., & Nowak, P. (2012). Effects of student participation in decision making at

school: A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research. *Educational*

*Research Review*, 7(1), 38–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2011.11.001>

Mayall, B. (2013). *A history of the sociology of childhood*. Institute of Education Press.

- McGregor, J. (2007). Recognizing student leadership: Schools and networks as sites of opportunity. *Improving Schools*, 10(1), 86–101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480207073725>
- McMahon, B. (2012). Education in and for democracy: Conceptions of schooling and student voice. In B. McMahon & J. Portelli (Eds.), *Student engagement in urban schools: Beyond neoliberal discourses* (pp. 29–48). Information Age.
- Perry-Hazan, L. (2019). Conceptualising conflicts between student participation and other rights and interests. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(2), 184–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1599324>
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children and Society*, 15(2), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.617>
- Solhaug, T. (2018). Democratic schools—Analytical perspectives. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 17(1), 2–12. <https://doi.org/10.4119/UNIBI/jsse-v17-i1-1791>
- Struthers, A. E. C. (2016). Breaking down boundaries: Voice and participation in English primary education. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 24(2), 434–468.  
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02402011>
- Thomson, P. (2010). Involving children and young people in educational change: Possibilities and challenges. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Second international handbook of educational change* (pp. 809–824). Springer.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6\\_45](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6_45)
- Thomson, P. (2011). Coming to terms with “voice.” In G. Czerniawski & W. Kidd (Eds.), *The student voice handbook: Bridging the academic/practitioner divide* (pp. 19–30). Emerald.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989.

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (1997). *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: New Zealand*. United Nations.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/231733?ln=en>

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2003). *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: New Zealand*. United Nations.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/513562?ln=en>

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2011). *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: New Zealand*. United Nations.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/702363?ln=en>

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2016). *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: New Zealand*. The United Nations.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/856035?ln=en>

Wyness, M. (2012). Children's participation and intergenerational dialogue: Bringing adults back into the analysis. *Childhood*, 20(4), 429–442.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212459775>

Wyness, M. (2013). Global standards and deficit childhoods: The contested meaning of children's participation. *Children's Geographies*, 11(3), 340–353.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.812280>

Wyness, M. (2015). *Childhood*. Polity Press.

Wyness, M. (2018). Children's participation: Definitions, narratives and disputes. In C. Baraldi & T. Cockburn (Eds.), *Theorising childhood: Citizenship, rights and*

*participation* (pp. 53–72). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72673-1\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72673-1_3)



### **Discussion Questions**

1. The Mahi Ngātahi model deliberately illustrates a process for considering adults' beliefs, actions, and values that underpin effective children's participation in decision making in schools. To what extent would this more broad-spectrum model be of use in your context when thinking and talking about enabling student participation?
2. The Mahi Ngātahi model also does not specifically identify any "types" of children's participation practice or indicate their relative effectiveness. What is your response to a conceptualization of children's participation in decision making that does not list, describe, or rank specific practices?
3. Although the elements of the Mahi Ngātahi model are positioned within an indigenous model, does the idea of combining elements in particular ways in order to create a context conducive to effective children's participation in decision making still resonate with you?

## International Journal of Student Voice

## Editorial Board

## Lead Editor

Dana Mitra (The Pennsylvania State University, USA)

## Associate Editors

Mhairi Beaton (University of Aberdeen, Scotland)

Katherine Cumings Mansfield (Virginia Commonwealth University, USA)

Roseanna Bourke (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand)

Valentina Grion (University of Padova, Italy)

Kate Wall (Strathclyde University, England)

Paula Flynn (Trinity College University of Dublin, Ireland)

Emily Nelson (Eastern Institute of Technology, New Zealand)

## Advisory Board

Helen Beattie (Up for Learning, Vermont, USA)

Ulrika Bergmark (Lulea University of Technology, Sweden)

Allison Cook-Sather (Bryn Mawr College, USA)

Paula Flynn (Trinity College, Ireland)

Susan Groundwater-Smith (University of Sydney, Australia)

Roger Holdsworth (University of Melbourne, Australia)

Rachel McNae (University of Waikato, New Zealand)

Carol Robinson (University of Brighton, England)

Hasina Ebrahim (University of South Africa, South Africa)

The International Journal of Student Voice (IJSV) is a peer-reviewed, open access e-journal publishing on the ways in which students co-lead their schools and communities by collaborating with teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders to define problems and develop potential solutions and/or take the lead on making change in their schools and communities. We define students to include a wide range of young people, from early childhood to university studies. Taking as foundational the right of students to develop their voices and leadership capabilities and take an active role in analyzing and shaping their educational experiences, the journal publishes research related to pupil/learner voice, youth-adult partnerships, child rights, youth participatory action research, students as activists and change agents, and

related fields. Likewise, we acknowledge the importance of adult educational stakeholders who share this belief and work to make the development of student voice, participation, and partnership a reality.

IJSV, established in 2015 by the Pennsylvania State University, welcomes pieces from researchers, practitioners, and students including traditional research-focused articles, practitioner reflections, and multi-media submissions. Peer review in this journal will include feedback from researchers, practitioners and students. All articles must have a user-friendly abstract that is understood by all audiences. Articles will be expected to end with a set of discussion questions to encourage online dialogue. Each submission will include a discussion forum to encourage conversation about the submissions.

For additional information, please go to the IJSV website: <https://ijsv.psu.edu>

Or contact Dana Mitra at: [dana@psu.edu](mailto:dana@psu.edu)