

Apathy or Ignorance?

The enduring absence of the child's voice as a right in education settings.

Dr Jonathon Sargeant
Faculty of Education & Arts
Australian Catholic University
jonathon.sargeant@acu.edu.au
@drsargio

The challenge of embedding rights awareness and practice into education is significant

Tiered education system distinct with some overlap (EC, Primary, Secondary Education)

- As children progress through each tier they progress in autonomy and agency but then return to bottom rung upon entry to the next tier.

Adults, who hold a view of the child as capable experts in their own world, seek the active and informed participation of the individual child. They view the child as a full but developing human with rights and responsibilities, an individual that has an interest in both the present and the future and assume that when a child speaks, they actually mean what they say.

But... not all adults hold this view

- Voice is often an optional extra
- Voice is infrequently connected to Rights (derided as an educational fad)
- Participation Rights consciousness/awareness education represents a very small element in ITE
- Misinterpreted conflicts with parent and teacher rights
- Misinterpreted understanding of catering to the individual within group (class) contexts

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

A 15 Page document that few Australians have read.

Many Australians, both adult and child have a poor understanding of the UNCRC and its core principles.

The UNCRC and its application in Education remains piecemeal beyond legal mandates.

Upholding *some* rights of the child in professional practice is clearly delineated as a matter of law.

Child Protection etc (embedded, mandated and advertised)

Right *to* an Education (embedded, mandated and advertised)

Upholding the participation rights tends towards a matter of convenience

Rights to freedom of expression and opinion (misinterpreted, limited advertisement)

Right to an education of *quality* (misunderstood in contest with the performative agenda) UNCRC Art. 29, UNDRIP, Art. 14, UNCRPD Art. 24, UDHR Art 26.

Child Rights are Relevant

(but rarely explicitly linked)

- The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
- Australian Student Wellbeing Framework
- Framework for Protecting Australia's children
- Sustainable Development goals (3, 4, 5)
- Incheon Declaration (Education for sustainable development 2030)
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Contemporary Cultural Priorities

Closing the Gap, Child Protection, eSafety, Post-COVID Mental Health, Climate Change

National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

- 1. Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture.*
- 2. Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.*

The (Victorian) Child Safe Standards

Standard 1: Organisations establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued.

Standard 3: Children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.

- Forward focused*
- Aspirational and strategic*
- Underpin a proactive philosophy*
- The least “visible”*
- Perhaps the most challenging to implement, to maintain and, to assure authenticity*

The UNCRC is Relevant to Education beyond Article 28

Article 3 - Best interests

Article 8 - Identity

Article 9, 18 - Parents

Article 12 - Voice

Article 13, 14 - Information

Article 19 - Safe from all forms of abuse

Article 23, 28, 29 - Education

Article 31 – Play, rest

Article 34 - Free from sexual abuse

But, without Article 42 none of these can be fully implemented or understood

Article 42 of the convention states:

“States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike “(UNCRC 1989).

Teacher Education and Professional Development offerings tend to react to
rather than lead governments – performative, achievement foci

But there is some (faint) hope

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

Recommendations

- particular attention to teaching reading, literacy and numeracy, classroom management, cultural responsiveness, teaching students with diverse needs and working with families/carers
- a quality measure of, increasing ITE student completion rates and increasing under-represented groups in teaching degrees, including First Nations peoples

Who, how, why of Child Participation

Who – Every Child

- Not only the worthy (chosen)

How - Product, process, skillset, techniques for voice-inclusive practice

- There are many exceptional models available, but without a broader child rights awareness, the market remains fragmented and insular

Why - Convincing the unconvincibles remains the ongoing mission.

- Nowhere in the convention does it say *put children in charge*
- Nowhere does it say that in giving children rights, parents, teachers and helping professionals must lose some of their rights (*Articles 3 & 5 explicitly address this myth*).
- By restricting the opportunity for the child to express their view, the extent of a child's capacity is often hidden.

UNCRC - Article 29

A collective obligation of the education community.

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
 - a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their **fullest potential**;
 - b) The development of respect for human rights and **fundamental freedoms**, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
 - c) The development of **respect** for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
 - d) The preparation of the child for **responsible life** in a **free society**, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
 - e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

Perhaps it's about Tuning in

For change to occur, one must be receptive (tuned in) to the possibility.

The 'product' of child involvement needs to be presented as more than a "performance"

Including children in the process by acknowledging rather than preaching their role

Teacher Education and Professional Development needs to further address the misunderstandings that impede Child Rights action through explicit Child Rights Education – Article 42