



Featured Article

# Children's rights and school psychology: Children's right to participation<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The Convention on the Rights of the Child detailed an international imperative to fulfilling, protecting, and respecting the rights of every child. In particular, the Convention set out a clear mandate for guaranteeing opportunities for children to be heard on all matters of concern to them. The attainment of these goals involves respecting and valuing children as active participants in the educational process. If fully implemented, the right of children to express views and have them taken seriously, throughout the school environment, would represent one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, for their dignity and citizenship, and for their capacities to contribute significantly towards their own well-being. These values and principles are consistent with those of the school psychology profession, thus, school psychologists are encouraged to be at the Center of the process advocating and actualizing the Convention in schools throughout the world.

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## 1. Introduction

*I don't know about my rights, but you don't know about my life.*

[~6 year old boy from Bangladesh (United Nations Children's Fund, 2003).]

*"If you had a problem in the Black community, and you brought in a group of White people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there'd probably be a public outcry. It would be the same for women's issues or gay issues. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us."*

[~Jason, 17 years old, from Bronx, NY (Lansdown, 2011a).]

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*"It was my first experience of hearing a document based on the voices of children including my own voice. After listening to it, I thought, 'Children can change the world if they are given a chance. We have to fight for that chance.'"*

[~Jehanzeb, 12 years old, from Pakistan (Lansdown, 2011a).]

Everyone has a stake in education – parents, teachers, employers, the state, and of course, children themselves. The interests of all are affected by the quality, nature, and outcomes of education systems. However, the rights and needs of children within the system can easily get forgotten. It is rare for governments, for example, to enlist the perspectives of children when discussing education legislation, policy, or delivery. Of course, in many respects the agenda for education is the same for all the stakeholders. Everyone would subscribe to the need for high standards, served by well-qualified teachers, an appropriate curriculum, and adequate resourcing. But education needs to go beyond academic attainment. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989; hereinafter referred to as the Convention\)](#), which was established by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25 of November 1989 and entered into force in September 1990, is now virtually universally ratified. The Convention demands a broad vision of education. In particular, Article 29 elaborates the aims of education in terms of promoting the fullest possible development of each child and helping each child acquire the values, skills, and confidence necessary to contribute to democratic life.

The attainment of these goals involves respecting and valuing children as active players in the educational process (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). If fully implemented, the right of children to express views and have them taken seriously, throughout the school environment, would represent one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, for their dignity and citizenship, and for their capacities to contribute significantly towards their own well-being. Indeed, respect for participation rights within education is fundamental to the realisation of the right to education. As such the Convention has significant implications for the school psychology profession. Unfortunately, a culture of engagement of children either in the classroom or the wider school environment remains relatively rare across the world. Authoritarianism, discrimination, and violence continue to characterise schooling in many countries. Such environments are conducive to neither the expression of children's views, nor to those views being taken seriously. Indeed, many children fail or drop out of school because of a pedagogical environment that ignores their views and denies them opportunities for participation. It is of critical importance, therefore, to strengthen understanding of the meaning of participation and its application to the school environment.

The purpose of this article is to provide information to school psychologists around the world regarding the Convention's emphasis on children's right to participation and explore implications for practice aimed at actualizing the goals of the Convention. The first section describes the concept of participation as related to the Convention, with particular emphasis on Article 12, linkages with other provisions in the Convention, and the application to students of all ages. The second section discusses potential contributions of recognising and respecting children's participation rights, including promoting and protecting individual development, enhancing processes and outcomes, and promoting citizenship and respect for others. The third section explores opportunities for participation within education, such as involving children in decision affecting their education, participatory child-centred learning, democratic learning environments, and participation in developing education policy and national student organisations. The fourth section highlights the opportunities for school psychologists in respecting children's participation in their professional practice, including systems level advocacy, policy development, student involvement in developing individualized education plans, and leadership in measuring and evaluating children's participation. The final section identifies future directions towards understanding and actualizing children's participation, emphasising the importance of further scholarship to understand the process and outcomes associated with numerous child participation initiatives throughout the world. As discussed more thoroughly below, given the roles of school psychologists around the world (Jimerson, Oakland, & Farrell, 2007; Jimerson, Skokut, Cardenas, Malone, & Stewart, 2008), school psychologists can play a major role in contributing to the realisation of children's participation rights at all levels of the education system – within their individual practice and within the systems, institutions, and agencies in which they work.

## 2. The concept of participation

Article 12 of the Convention states that each child is capable of forming views and has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, and that one's views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. It is a unique provision in human rights law. It recognises that, although for children, unlike adults, there is no automatic presumption in favour of autonomy or independent decision-making; they are, nevertheless, entitled to respect as human beings, with rights to be involved in decisions that affect them. As such, it provides a balance between, on the one hand, the engagement of children as active agents in their own lives, and on the other, their entitlement to additional protection during the period of childhood.

### 2.1. Understanding Article 12 of the Convention

It is important to be clear about what Article 12 does and does not mean. Article 12 does not give children the right to complete autonomy. It does not give them the right to take control of all decisions affecting them. It does not give them the right to act in ways that ride roughshod over the rights of others – whether those others are students, teachers, parents, or administrative staff. However, it does mean that children should be involved when decisions about them are being made, that they should be afforded space to articulate issues that matter to them, and that adults should give weight to what children say in

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