

# Editorial

## *Listen to what students say*

The articles in this special issue of *Set* are based on research exploring the rights of the child. In 2019, the Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce said that Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the rights of the child must be foundational throughout our future schooling system. The Taskforce defined the "rights of the child" as those agreed in three United Nations charters: The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The Taskforce argued that, collectively, these rights were essential "to enable every learner/ākonga to belong, to have holistic wellbeing, and succeed whoever they are and wherever they are in the system" (p. 4).

The articles take a "student voice" approach to give young people the space to articulate their views, aspirations, and experiences about aspects of education that matter to them. The authors provide "evidence informed" analysis and advice that we hope will be of both practical and reflexive value to teachers and school leaders.

Engaging children and young people in opportunities to express their views on matters that are important to them, and normalising such opportunities, is only a first step towards agency and wellbeing. Children also need their teachers to act on their views. Children "often express disappointment about the fact that little account has been taken of their views and that nothing appears to have changed in spite of their engagement" (Lundy, 2018, p. 341). Equally, children are not easily fooled; they know when they are participating in a consultation or decision at school in name only, or on a relatively trivial matter.

The combined effects of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the UNCRC and growing awareness of the obligation to ensure that "student voice" informs policy, practice, and research are now beginning to change our educational system and experiences for children, and to influence teacher practice. UNCRC's definition of children is up to the age of 18 years. The expectation that children should have a meaningful, deliberative say in their learning and school life, has meant that curriculum design and school change are beginning to shift to more democratic practices

and partnership approaches. These pave the way for greater equity in education.

However, many children do not know their rights, and teachers are not always familiar with the difference between eliciting "student voice" or listening to what students say and ensuring that children have opportunities to exercise their legal rights. When teachers ask for children's views on matters that affect them, 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 not optional.

The researchers in this compilation have gathered and analysed the "voices" of secondary school-aged students.<sup>1</sup> The young people and rangatahi accounts from the studies foreground diverse issues of adolescent identity formation. They showcase multiple student voices that speak of wanting to be "themselves", not having some generic attribution to define them, and of working out ways to

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pursue their individual and collective pathways to success and to leading their best lives.

It is important for readers to appreciate that these young people wanted to define their lives as “who they are” in a world where others often burden them with adult expectations, beliefs, norms, values, and standards. The things that matter to these young people are commonplace, everyday aspects of their lives—such as menstruation or living with a diagnosis, such as ADHD, or working out how to retain their unique sense of self in class and at school.

Each article considers an aspect of importance through the eyes of students and from which suggestions are put forward for teachers to act on. As well as clear key messages for teachers, many articles also put teachers in touch with key resources that support the sort of suggestions the students have made.

## The collection

The introductory article is presented by us, guest editors Roseanna Bourke and John O’Neill. It sets the scene by explaining the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and children’s rights to the routine work of classrooms and schools. We provide practical suggestions for teachers to help them understand and bring to life the underlying principles of student voice, and why this matters to children.

In their article, “Recognising Rangatahi as Active Agents in Advocating for their Rights to Whānau Ora and Collective Wellbeing in Education”, two Māori educational psychologists, Catherine Page and Sarika Rona, show that although rangatahi Māori perspectives are recognised and valued within whānau, hapū, and iwi in Aotearoa, when a child attends English-medium schools they find their voices are not always well received or included. The authors strongly advocate for a tangata whenua approach to rangatahi Māori rights. The importance of whanaungatanga, Māoritanga, manaakitanga, and aroha are explained through the voices of rangatahi.

Becca Hylton and Roseanna Bourke’s article, “Young People’s Perspective of School-based Resourcing for Menstruation”, is based on Hylton’s research with young people around their access to resources and support, and implications of this for their education. UNCRC Article 28 calls for the need to encourage regular attendance at schools. This article shows that, when young people are menstruating, they are not always afforded their rights even though they are experiencing a normal part of life. Economic, cultural, physical, and resourcing barriers prevent many from attending school each month, and these students have simple messages for teachers to help them.

Sara Lee and Maria Dacre’s article on “The Inclusion

of Cultural Activities to Support Cultural Identity for Ethnic Minority Groups in Secondary Schools” works with Article 8 (safeguarding identity) and Article 31 (the right to play and recreational activities). Through talking with South Asian and East Asian children in secondary schools, the authors identify the importance of student-led, authentic cultural activities to avoid tokenistic attempts to portray their cultures at school, no matter how well-intentioned teachers or peers are.

Hayley Davies and John O’Neill’s article, “Adolescents’ Experiences of Identity Development in Schooling”, explores UNCRC Articles 28 and 29 to appreciate how the right to an education supports young people’s holistic development, and enhances their sense of identity. These young people called for a more person-centred approach to education that prioritises belonging, connection, and care.

Mere Berryman’s invited article for this collection, “A Political and Policy Intersection Where Success Depends On All of Us”, explores her experience of “formally listening and learning” (p. 34) from students in the 1990s as a teacher engaged in research. Students helped her to develop checklists that would enable students to generate principles for practice themselves; a resource that was later trialled in other schools. Mere traces subsequent initiatives with young people and identifies four key learnings that influence the way we can engage in our teaching and support of young people. As Mere concludes, “our own wellbeing also depends on their future success” (p. 39).

Xanthé Rademeyer and Nicole Mincher’s article, “How Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Influences Young People’s Learning”, explores the voices of young people identified with ADHD and their advice and ideas for teachers to nurture a classroom climate of support. At times, these young people experience classrooms as loud, hectic, chaotic, overwhelming, and busy, whereas others might experience these same classrooms as lively, energetic, and socially engaged. This highlights that *their* experiences are based on their own particular needs and that teachers need to find out what these are.

Emma Read, Tarryn Robertson, Vijaya Dharan, and John O’Neill’s article, “Secondary Students’ Perceptions of Their School’s Disciplinary Processes”, explores UNCRC Article 12 and Article 28 in terms of children receiving equal opportunities in education. Through the students’ voices, the article reveals some of the issues teachers and schools face regarding challenging student behaviours, from the perspective of two groups of adolescents: those who are disciplined through exclusion and those who self-manage in order not to be disciplined. Both groups of students felt that adults did not always understand the reason *behind* their behaviours and called for greater dialogue between educators and students to involve young people more in the decision-making processes.

Notably, across all the articles, students reported how the basic humanitarian quality of their relations with teachers makes such a difference in day-to-day decisions, conversations, and actions towards them as young people. Young people can readily identify where, why, and how they feel their rights are upheld and their mana enhanced. The various UNCRC articles showcased in this collection of articles contribute to a discourse of how day-to-day living and learning at school for children in Aotearoa New Zealand can become authentically “rights-based”. These articles offer practical points of departure for secondary teachers, leaders, and trustees to explore similar issues in their own schools, with their own students, and their families and whānau.

*Guest editors:*

*Roseanna Bourke and John O'Neill*

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## Note

1. The ethics of each study reported here, except for Mere Berryman's, was assessed and conducted according to The Massey University Applied Research Project (Ethics Notification Number: 4000022296).

## References

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