

Comment

LISTENING AND EMPOWERING: CHILDREN IN SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

A children's rights-based approach to involving children in decision making

Elizabeth Welty and Laura Lundy

ABSTRACT: Children's issues have become a greater priority on political agendas since the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Each government has agreed to ensure that all those working with and for children understand their duties in relation to upholding children's rights including the obligation to involve children in decisions that affect them (Article 12). Respecting children's views is not just a model of good pedagogical practice, but a legally binding obligation. However, there is a limited awareness of Article 12, and how to actualise it. While many people speak about the 'voice of the child' or 'student voice', these concepts do not capture the full extent of the provision. Lundy (2007) developed a model, which helps duty bearers involve children meaningfully in decision-making. According to this model four separate factors require consideration: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. In this paper, we provide an overview of these four factors and a summary of the main implications of the model.

Children's issues have become a greater priority on international and national political agendas since the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and opened it for signature in 1989. The UNCRC is the most widely endorsed convention, ratified by 193 states including all EU member states. Each government has agreed to ensure that all those working with and for children understand their duties in relation to upholding children's rights including the obligation to involve children in decisions that affect them.

Article 12 (1) of the UNCRC states that:

"States 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."

Greater awareness is needed of the fact that respecting children's views is not just a model of good pedagogical practice but a legally binding obligation since one of the on-going obstacles to the successful implementation of Article 12 is that there is a limited awareness of the provision itself.^{1,2} While many people speak about the 'voice

of the child' or 'student voice', these concepts do not capture the full extent of Article 12. In view of this, Lundy³ developed a model which helps duty bearers (such as educators, policy makers) involve children meaningfully in decision making. According to this model, in order to successfully implement Article 12 and give children a role in the decision making process, four separate factors require consideration: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. These concepts and their relationship with the two main strands of Article 12 are represented in Figure 1.

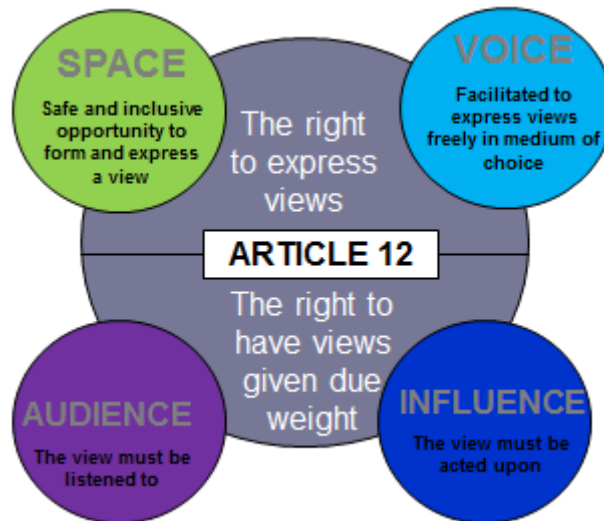


Figure 1. The 'Voice' model includes four factors allowing the involvement of children in decision making, and their relationship with Article 12.

Space

A prerequisite for the meaningful engagement of children and young people in decision making is creating an opportunity for involvement — a space in which children are encouraged to express their views. Article 12 requires those working with and for children to 'assure' the child of the right to express their view. Therefore, an important first step is that children are asked which matters they consider important and how they would like to be involved in influencing the outcome of these decisions. Further, it is equally important that children are asked whether or not they would even like to participate in decision making. Finally, the space must be inclusive. It is important that the views of a diverse range of children are sought and that participation is not just afforded to the articulate and literate.

In order to provide a safe and inclusive opportunity for children to form and express their views, an organisation or institution may consider the following questions:

- Have children's views been sought actively?
- Is there a 'safe space' in which children can express themselves freely?
- Have steps been taken to ensure that all children affected by the decision can take part?

Voice

Article 12 gives children a right to express their views freely. Children's right to express their view is not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form that perspective, mature or not. Therefore, children may need the help of others in order to form a view, and have a right to receive direction and guidance from adults in order to do so. Further, Article 12 stipulates that children should have the opportunity to express their view freely, in various formats such as, 'orally, in writing or print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.' (Art. 13, UNCRC)

In order to provide appropriate information and facilitate the formation and expression of children's views, an organisation may consider the following questions:

- Do children have the information they need in an appropriate format to enable them to form a view?
- Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express their opinion?

Audience

Article 12 requires children's view to be given 'due weight'. Implicit within the notion of 'due weight' is the fact that children have a right to have their views listened to by those who make decisions. There are a variety of ways which adults can increase their capacity for listening to the various verbal and non-verbal ways which children express their perspectives. Yet, even where there is no doubt about the child's perspective on an issue, there is no guarantee that their views will be communicated to adults who are willing to give them effect. There is therefore a need to ensure that children have a 'right of audience' – a guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen.

In order to ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen, a few items to consider are:

- Who is the 'audience' for children's perspectives?
- Is there a process for communicating children's views?
- Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

Influence

Children's views must be given 'due weight'. The challenge is to find ways of ensuring that adults not only listen to children but that they take children's views seriously. While this cannot be guaranteed, one incentive/ safeguard is to ensure that children are told how their views were taken into account. Further, children and young people should be told what decision was made and how their views were taken into account.

In order to ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, consider the following questions:

- Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?
- What process is in place to ensure that children's views inform decisions that affect children?
- Have children been informed of the ways in which their opinion may impact decisions?
- Have the children been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?

Meaningful participation in issues that impact children is 'the right of the child and not the gift of adults'.⁴ Whilst all those who work with and for children are bound to actively seek children's perspectives on issues that affect them, effectively implementing Article 12 is also a means of realising children's other rights such as their right of access to a quality education since enabling children to be involved in decision-making improves the quality of decisions taken. Engaging with children and young people as rights-holders and providing the space, encouraging their voice, and providing an audience to influence decisions affecting them helps empower children as effective agents of change in their education and beyond.

If you have questions or comments, please contact Elizabeth Welty at e.welty@qub.ac.uk and Laura Lundy at L.lundy@qub.ac.uk.

Notes and references

¹ G. Lansdown (2001), *Promoting Child Participation in Democratic Decision Making*, Innocenti Insight, Florence, Italy.

² G. Lansdown (2011), *Every child's right to be heard: a resource guide on the un committee on the rights of the child general comment no. 1 UNICEF and Save the Children*.

³ L. Lundy (2007), *Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *British Educational Research Journal* **33**(6): 927–942.

⁴ See note 3.

⁵ United Nations (1989), *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.

⁶ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), *General Comment no. 12, The Right of the Child to be Heard (CRC/C/GC/12)*, United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.

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HOW TO CITE: E. Welty and L. Lundy (2013), "A children's rights-based approach to involving children in decision making", *JCOM* **12**(03): C02.