

# From Principle to Practice: Youth engagement at the international summer course on the rights of the child

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Article abstract

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* creates an express obligation on State parties to take into consideration the views and opinions of children and youth in matters that affect them. State parties, children's rights advocates, scholars, and non-profits have all recognized the importance of the right to participation, and have undertaken many different approaches to ensure the authenticity of the experience for children and young people. The following note details some of the accepted principles for meaningful youth engagement, and reflects back on the experience of the Youth Rapporteur Programme at the 2015 edition of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child.

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AT  
THE INTERNATIONAL SUMMER COURSE ON  
THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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**Résumé**

La Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant des Nations Unies impose à tous les États parties l'obligation immédiate d'obtenir l'avis des enfants sur les questions qui les concernent. Les États parties, les défenseurs des droits de l'enfant, les experts et les organisations à but non lucratif ont tous reconnu l'importance du droit à la participation et ont déployé beaucoup d'effort afin de rendre l'expérience encore plus authentique pour les enfants et les jeunes. Le prochain ouvrage fourni des informations détaillées sur certains principes acceptés pour l'engagement concret des jeunes et passe en revue l'expérience du programme de rapporteur jeunesse lors du Cours d'été international relatif aux droits de l'enfant 2015.

**Mots-clés** : jeunesse, principes d'engagement, droits de l'enfant, Cours d'été relatif aux droits de l'enfant, Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant des Nations Unies, droits à la participation.

**Abstract**

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* creates an express obligation on State parties to take into consideration the views and opinions of children and youth in matters that affect them. State parties, children's rights advocates, scholars, and non-profits have all recognized the importance of the right to participation, and have undertaken many different approaches to ensure the authenticity of the

experience for children and young people. The following note details some of the accepted principles for meaningful youth engagement, and reflects back on the experience of the Youth Rapporteur Programme at the 2015 edition of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child.

**Keywords** : youth, principles of engagement, children's rights, Summer Course on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, right to participation.

*“Nothing about us, without us.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Since the ratification of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) in 1991, stakeholders across Canada have been determined to create a society “fit for children”. In so doing, governments, academics, non-profits and private sector organizations have recognized the importance of the obligation to engage and empower children and youth to play a meaningful role in the process. Yet, as a society, we continue to struggle with the development of processes that authentically engage children and youth and ensure that they are able to contribute to the maximum of their potential.

Recognizing the importance of the right to participation as enunciated in article 12 of the UNCRC, the Organizing Committee of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child established a Support Committee for the establishment and delivery of a holistic Youth Rapporteur programme for its 2015 edition. Members of the Support Committee employed a variety of techniques emanating from existing principles and best practices in youth engagement, including the development of a parallel but youth-focused Summer Course schedule, the delivery of a day-long introduction section to children's rights, the use of play-based learning activities and workshops, and the opportunity to share their child rights projects with all Summer Course participants.

The following reflection note details the basis for certain principles of authentic youth engagement and the lessons learned by the Support Committee in relation to their experience at the 2015 edition of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child. Section I will provide a brief explanation of article 12 of the UNCRC and an analysis on the authenticity of different levels of engagement. Section II will enunciate and define the accepted principles of youth engagement and describe how they were used by the Support Committee in its Youth Rapporteur programme. In section III, the author will highlight some lessons learned from this experience and provide some considerations for the future of the Youth Rapporteur programme<sup>2</sup>.

### **Section I: Article 12(1) of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child***

*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.*

In the inclusion of the right to participate in the UNCRC, the international community challenged the existing paradigm of childhood. Whereas childhood was once romanticized as “a passive playground in which a person grows, becomes acculturated, and learns the rules of society” (Schulman, 2006, p. 26), the reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw children facing important social issues such as technological advancements, the re-structuring of the family unit, large-scale poverty, massive outbreaks of war, and a multiplicity of complex matters that provided them with invaluable expertise in their rights and needs. A right of participation recognizes children and youth as “sources of knowledge and power” (Fox, Mediratta, Ruglis, Stoudt, Shah, and Fine, 2010, p. 17) and establishes a corresponding obligation on adults to seek, acknowledge, and respect their expertise.

The right to participation enunciated in art. 12(1) UNCRC is the fundamental reflection of this shift toward recognition of children as

subjects of rights instead of objects of rights. The provision has been broken down by the Committee on the Rights of the Child into four parts:

- An obligation on State parties to put mechanisms in place for authentic youth engagement;
- A recognition that children have evolving capacities that cannot be determined by reference to age;
- An option for the child to decide if they want to express their views; and
- A limitation on the instances where a child should be invited to do so (General Comment, n<sup>o</sup>12, para. 19-31).

Though the obligation set out in article 12 UNCRC refers to a child's right to have a voice in the *decision-making processes* that affect their lives, the author contends that the right to participate should be interpreted broadly to include research projects, activities and initiatives, conferences, and other venues. While legal and policy decisions are not typically made at academic gatherings, many of the participants engage in work that has direct and indirect influences on children's lives. Providing a forum, such as the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child, where academics and practitioners can interact with young people in an authentic and meaningful manner is beneficial for all parties involved. Summer Course speakers and participants have the opportunity to learn from youth and their experiences, which will ultimately inform the outcomes of their future work. On the other hand, youth are provided with a safe space to share their views opinions, and have the chance to gain the knowledge and skills that they may need to influence future policy and decision-making processes. While these benefits may not directly influence the decision-making processes envisioned by art. 12 UNCRC, the Summer Course builds a community of knowledge sharing that is inclusive of the multiplicity of stakeholders that should be, or are already, involved in policy-making.

Recognizing the rare opportunity that an event like the Summer Course offers, the Organizing Committee had to decide what type of engagement would be the most meaningful for young people in the circumstances. In 1992, Roger A. Hart illustrated that there are multiple types and degrees of engagement through his "Ladder of Participation" (Hart, 1992, p. 8). The Ladder identifies eight rungs, with the first three, manipulation,

decoration and tokenism falling under non-participation (Hart, 1992, p. 8). The following five rungs depict the different degrees of participation, ranging from consultation through to child-initiated, adult-supported decision-making (*Ibid.*). The Summer Course Organizing Committee opted for adult-initiated engagement with shared decision-making powers between a Support Committee and the Youth Rapporteurs. The Committee felt that this choice represented the best balance between considerations such as the nature of the activity, the desired outcomes of engagement, the age of the participants, and the rights at play.

## **Section II: Principles of Youth Engagement in Practice**

In order to meet the obligations set out in art. 12 UNCRC, all duty-bearers must “ensure appropriate conditions for supporting and encouraging children to express their views” (General Comment, n°12, para. 49). Adults are responsible for both creating the opportunities and managing the processes where children and youth share their opinions (Lansdown, 2001, p. 2). While the nature and process of these opportunities may vary, the conditions that need to be put in place typically ought to respect the principles outlined in this Part. These principles have been developed through a combination of research on best practices, application of a rights-based analysis, and feedback from young people themselves; they aim to ensure the authenticity of an engagement experience across every context. Nevertheless, the author notes that youth engagement remains a relatively new process, and that there is no foolproof formula for meaningful engagement. Adults attempting to take a child rights-based approach to their activities must be prepared to make mistakes (Lansdown, 2001, p. 16) and be continuously open to changes and derogations proposed by the young people they are working with.

### *2.1. Pre-Engagement*

#### 2.1.1. Principle 1 : Manage Expectations

In order to engage children and youth in a manner consistent with article 12 UNCRC, several steps must be taken prior to the planned engagement activity to set the expectations of all the parties involved. The importance of providing “full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-

appropriate information” about the activity and the child’s right to participate is foundational in assuring that the child’s engagement is voluntary (General Comment, n°12, para. 134). Thus, at the first point of contact, the following information should be conveyed in clear, child-friendly language :

- The purpose of the opportunity;
- The relevance of the opportunity to the life of the child;
- The process of the activity overall;
- The framework of engagement that will be used;
- The level of decision-making authority the child has over the various elements of the activity;
- The expected deliverables of the activity; and
- Any and all other information deemed relevant to the activity.

Wherever possible, the child or youth should be encouraged to co-develop these expectations with the organizer, as best practices in managing expectations dictate that allowing young people to assist in determining the extent and nature of their participation is an empowering experience (Lansdown, 2001, p. 10). This form of transparency in building expectations often prevents feelings of disengagement and disenfranchisement from arising at a later stage because it ensures that all parties have reasonable and matching understandings of their roles and deliverables (Lansdown, 2001, p. 12).

#### 2.1.1.1. Application at the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

Approximately two months prior to the beginning of the Summer Course, the Support Committee contacted the youth that had committed to attend as Youth Rapporteurs for the 2015 edition. During these conversations, the members of the Support Committee explained to the youth what the Summer Course was, how they could be involved, and what the engagement framework might look like. The Committee sought feedback from them on the nature of their involvement, and the youth-specific Summer Course schedule. As such, they were able to ensure that both the youth and adults involved had the same expectations around the engagement opportunity and the outcomes of the event.

### 2.1.2. Principle 2: Provide Adequate Supports for Inclusive Participation

“Participation must be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalized children - including both girls and boys - to be involved” (General Comment, n° 12, para. 134). Oftentimes, engagement opportunities fail to adequately support the traditional non-participant populations such as children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, newcomer children, and children from low-income families (Barber, 2009, p. 27; Fox *et al.*, 2010, p. 4). These populations typically face additional barriers to participation beyond their age, which can include financial capacity, physical, mental or emotional challenges, time, and other resource constraints. (Fox *et al.*, 2010, p. 4-5). To ensure that young people from a multitude of different backgrounds and experiences are included in the activity, adult organizers have a responsibility to provide differing levels and types of support to each participant (Lansdown, 2001, p. 10; Pittman, Martin and Williams, 2007, p. 24). Meeting this requirement of inclusivity is important not only in ascertaining the quality of the feedback obtained, but also as a visual demonstration to the young people involved that adults recognize the various intersections of identities they may connect with, and how these might influence their perspectives on matters they are facing in their lives.

#### 2.1.2.1. Application at the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

The young people who took part in the Youth Rapporteur program of the Summer Course not only came from five different provinces across Canada but also represented an assortment of backgrounds<sup>3</sup>. The Support Committee provided the necessary financial contributions for each of the Rapporteurs who attended and were flexible about arrival and return dates, recognizing that the youth may have other commitments to attend. In addition, the Support Committee ensured that the necessary chaperones and adult allies were present throughout the week of the Summer Course so that the Youth Rapporteurs had access to a social worker in the event that they needed professional support.



## 2.2. *Engagement Activity*

### 2.2.1. Principle 3 : Create a Child-Friendly Environment

Children and youth should be engaged in environments where they feel safe and secure (O'Donnell, 2009, p. 41). Adult organizers need to not only be trained to deal with the variety of physical, mental, and emotional needs a child may express during the engagement activity (General Comment, n°12, para. 49), but also on “how to listen to what youth have to say and to respect the experience, knowledge, and perspective [they] bring to the table” (Pearson and Voke, 2003, p. 3).

To create a child-friendly environment, adult organizers must be willing to employ several strategies to make children feel *comfortable* with sharing their opinion. These may include wearing less formal dress attire, hosting the activity in a non-traditional work environment, and using child-friendly language and presentation formats. Children should also be encouraged to work with the facilitators to establish ground rules for the activity (Lansdown, 2001, p. 10) in order to ensure the environment reflects their needs. Providing these safe spaces where children and youth feel in control and at ease in their environment is key to delivering a meaningful opportunity for participation.

#### 2.2.1.1. Application at the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

The Support Committee dedicated an extra day prior to the commencement of the Course for youth-specific training. The purpose of this introductory session was twofold; firstly, it was an opportunity for all of the Youth Rapporteurs to get to know each other and the members of the Support Committee in an informal environment. The Support Committee used icebreaker games to build rapport between all of the Youth Rapporteurs, as well as with the Committee members. Secondly, the introduction session aimed to educate the Youth Rapporteurs on basic children's rights history and terminology to prepare them for the presentations being given throughout the week. The Support Committee hoped that by assisting the Youth Rapporteurs in building relationships with each other and providing them with the fundamental tools to

successfully navigate the Course, the youth would feel safe in the environment.

### 2.2.2. Principle 4 : Be Flexible

As noted by Gerison Lansdown in, “Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic Decision-Making”, adults typically believe that the structures and processes they have put in place are the most appropriate and sensible options for child participation (Lansdown, 2001, p. 11). Proper engagement opportunities require the adults involved to challenge this assumption and be flexible to proposed changes made by the children (Stymiest, MacNevin and Loughery, 2010, p. 11). Children are experts in being young, and “will have views and ideas on how to construct effective methods of involvement that are likely to differ from processes or forums designed for adults” (Lansdown, 2001, p. 13). Allowing them to constructively influence and change the structures that the adult organizers have implemented plays to their strengths and guarantees the authenticity of the insight they provide. Thus, adult organizers must be receptive to child feedback and able to adapt their planned processes accordingly.

#### 2.2.2.1. Application at the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

The Support Committee had prepared a youth-specific schedule for the Summer Course with certain workshops specifically designed for the youth engagement portion. However, over the course of the week, that schedule was continuously adapted and changed to reflect the feedback received from the Youth Rapporteurs. Elements such as workload, break times, and activity structure were often changed after daily de-brief sessions with the group.

### 2.3. *Post-Engagement*

#### 2.3.1. Principle 5 : Be Accountable

Regardless of the form of engagement employed, adult organizers have a responsibility to be accountable to the children and youth that participated in their activity. Young people take part in initiatives because

they are relevant to their lives (Pearson and Voke, 2003, p. 26). Consequently, there is an expectation of reciprocity that accompanies participation; at an ACCESS Open Minds- New Brunswick consultation (2015) on youth engagement, the youth present mentioned that if they are going to be engaged in a project, they expect to be informed of the results that come of their contribution. Being accountable, then, refers to a two-part obligation. First, it incorporates a requirement that the child's opinions be given "due weight" (UNCRC article 12), which is explained in General Comment, n<sup>o</sup> 12 as an obligation that "serious consideration" be given to the views a child expresses (para. 28-31). Second, adult organizers must follow up with those involved to demonstrate to them how their contribution influenced the final outcome of the initiative. Accountability demonstrates to children and youth that their expertise is recognized and valued, and acts as a mechanism for ensuring both the meaningfulness of the engagement experience as well as the inclusion of the child's perspectives in decisions being made.

#### 2.3.1.1. Application at the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

At the close of the Summer Course, the Support Committee prepared a survey for the Youth Rapporteurs in order to garner feedback on their experience. The survey asked youth to identify the elements of the event that they liked the most, as well as those that could be improved on. An overview of the feedback provided included an appreciation for the youth-specific programming and the flexibility of the Support Committee, but also some concerns around the style and language of the presentations and the heavy schedule. In addition to the survey, Youth Rapporteurs were offered further opportunities to put their learnings from the Summer Course into practice through participation in other activities hosted by the Child and Youth Advocate's Office of New Brunswick. Their future inclusion in related activities contributed to conveying a message that the Support Committee valued their participation and the perspectives that they added to the curriculum last summer.

### **Section III : Lessons Learned**

While the Youth Rapporteur programme saw great success at the 2015 edition of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child, the Support Committee realized that there remained much to learn in regards to the practical application of the youth engagement principles outlined in the previous Section. In several instances, the Youth Rapporteurs themselves delineated some important lessons for the next edition, most notably :

- Refrain from using language that requires a dictionary to understand;
- Provide the basic structure for youth presentations, while still allowing space for creativity and flexibility;
- Prepare adult presenters in advance for an audience that includes youth, so that their presentations can be tailored to meet everyone's needs; and
- Ensure more opportunities for dialogue between the Youth Rapporteurs and the rest of the Summer Course participants.

In future, the Summer Course Organizing Committee will be tasked both with re-implementing its successes, and learning from these mistakes. Some potential adaptations to the programme that could be explored are : including young people on the Organizing Committee, allowing youth to review presentation submissions, and building more youth-friendly activities into the broader Summer Course schedule. Furthermore, the Organizing Committee could re-engage the Youth Rapporteurs who took part in the 2015 edition in a number of ways, including: the development of guidelines for conference speakers on how to tailor their presentations to a diverse audience that includes academics, practitioners, and young people; the construction of a schedule that better takes into account the capacities and needs of youth participants; and the creation of interactive activities for all Summer Course participants.

While shortcomings must be acknowledged for the sake of improvements in the following editions, it is also important to note the overall success of the Youth Rapporteur programme. During a debrief session at the end of the Summer Course, youth highlighted this event as one of the few experiences where they felt that the adults involved truly understood the meaning of the phrase, “nothing about us, without us.”

They expressed feelings of being listened to, being understood, and being empowered to meaningfully contribute to the programme. Most importantly, the Youth Rapporteurs mentioned a genuine sense of inspiration from their experience at the Summer Course. The connections they formed with their peers, the lessons they learned about mental health, and the knowledge they gained with respect to their rights as young people made their participation in the Youth Rapporteur programme meaningful and empowering, and encouraged them to be champions of children's rights when they returned to their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The slogan “nothing about us, without us” has been used in the context of various marginalized populations seeking representation in decision-making processes that affect them. It has been used most notably in the context of persons with disabilities. See: Charlton, James I (1998). *Nothing About Us Without Us*. University of California Press.

<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of the principles outlined below, this reflection note was reviewed by three Youth Rapporteurs from the 2015 edition of the International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child to ensure that the opinions captured are an adequate reflection of the thoughts and perspectives shared by the participants in the programme last summer.

<sup>3</sup> Our Youth Rapporteurs included young people from two different indigenous communities, rural and urban areas, newcomer youth, and young people with mental health challenges.