

# EXPRESSION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AT SCHOOL: PUPILS' OPINION

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## **Abstract**

The article analyses 6-7 graders' opinion about expression of children's rights at school. The study has revealed that the right to education, the right to be healthy, the right to healthy and safe environment are viewed by 6-7 graders as the most important. These rights are of particular significance for teenagers' education, comprehensive development and socialization. The least important right to the teenagers is the right to participate in activities of the educational institution. The study has shown that most of pupils still believe that their rights are violated at school often or even always. Pupils lack emotional and physical security when at school. Among other causes, children's insecurity may also be related to school community members' occasional non-compliance with duties, as has been noted by pupils.

**Keywords:** *children's rights, school, pupils.*

## **Introduction**

Children's rights are a part of the human rights system. The level at which rights of this age *group* are safeguarded and protected in a country is among the specific indicators that signal about conditions of human rights, as this age group forms the part of society that is the most exposed to social and economic changes and the most vulnerable. Children belong to the part of society that cannot act on its own to fully represent, protect its rights, report abuse or neglect of the rights, use political resources to exercise its interests. Children's rights depend on the adults' perception and their conscious and determined efforts to ensure successful future to children (Kietytė, 2005, p. 188).

More comprehensive analysis of issues related to children's rights in Lithuania began several years after the restoration of Lithuanian independence. This was prompted by the reorganization of society and projection towards democracy. In year 1992, Lithuania acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which was ratified by the Seimas in 1995. This meant that from that moment children's rights enforcement was to be governed by the Lithuanian legislation and protected by the international consortium. There has been considerable improvement in certain areas of children's right protection on various levels of governance in the recent years; however, effective children's rights protection system is still one of the key strategic objectives for our country (Jonynienė, 2005). Country's scientists (Sakalauskas, 2000) believe that everyone can join the process of creation and improvement of

this system, not only through decision making power, but also by providing positive proposals, sharing own opinion, even caring about other children, doing what it takes to make sure that children have the best that the human kind can give them.

According to Jonynienė (2005), the policy aimed at strengthening children's rights and freedoms had important role in the agenda of the Lithuanian Government of 1997-2000. In the year 2000, the actual reform of children's rights and action plan was launched in Lithuania. The same year the Ombudsman for Children Act was adopted and the Institution of the Law on the Ombudsman for Children was established. The main objective of the Ombudsman is to ensure children's legal protection, protect children's rights and their legitimate interests, secure enforcement of children's rights and their legitimate interests as laid down in the international and national acts, monitor and control children's right enforcement and protection in Lithuania (the Law on the Ombudsman for Children of the Republic of Lithuania, 2007). Department for Family, Children and Youth was established in 2002 to coordinate the process of implementation of children and youth's rights protection policy. In 2003, the Law on Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, Children's Welfare State Policy concept (2003) was approved. The concept laid down key principles and values of children's welfare policy, based on which, main issues of children's welfare in Lithuania were identified; main objectives of the children's welfare policy for the coming decade were set in key areas, such as provision for children, children's participation and children's protection; strategic guidelines of implementation of the children's welfare policy were designed. Prevention programmes have been implemented jointly by the authorities and NGOs to ensure children's rights protection and deal with the hot issue of violence against children (Jonynienė, 2005). For the analysis of children's rights expression in Lithuanian schools, it is also important to refer to other substantial legal and educational documents: pupil's rights and duties are governed by the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992), Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2011), as well as local legal acts, such as the Statute, Rules of Procedure, contract etc. of the specific school.

Nonetheless, despite the efforts of the Government in areas aimed at securing protection of children's rights, studies carried out by the researchers (Jonynienė & Juodaitytė, 2006 and others) suggest that implementation of children's rights ideas in schools is still problematic. Children have been found to be feeling insecure at schools, both physically and psychologically. Other problems common in schools were also identified, such as disrespect to child's personality, his/her personal opinion, feelings, child's freedom of self-determination.

Controversy between children's rights declared in documents and their actual existence in a real child's life (at school in particular) has become the **scientific problem** of this article.

**The aim** of the article is to study pupils' opinion about the expression of children's rights at school.

### **Research methodology**

#### **Preparation for the research**

Empirical research was carried out to verify the arguments provided in the scientific literature and study pupil's opinion about the expression of children's rights at school (Klungevičiūtė, 2010). Scientists (Jonynienė, 2005; King & Vidourek, 2010; Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009; Raby, 2009; Ruck, Keating, Abramovitch, & Koegl, 1998; and others) believe that issues related to violation of children's rights at school reach their peak during adolescence. Based on this assumption, 113 thirteen or fourteen year olds attending schools of general education in Šiauliai city and district were chosen for the study. Compared to younger children, e.g. primary school, teenagers are already aware of their rights, possess certain social

and hands-on experience related to observance of children's rights, are able to remind about their rights to adults, and respond to violation of their interests (Malinauskienė, 2012).

Research planning process was based on the premise that it is only the children's opinion about the expression of their rights at school that can help perform unbiased study and build the picture of true situation of expression of children's rights in an educational institution, and research participants gave their consent to take part in the research. In order to comply with the ethics of scientific research, conversations with head teachers, deputy head teachers for education, class supervisors and pupils took place prior to carrying out the questionnaire survey of the pupils. After school communities became aware of the aim of the research, it was decided to have the questionnaire survey during out-of-class hours. This decision has ensured favourable conditions for filling out the questionnaires, for the research participants to be able to answer the questions on their own, be open, without being disturbed or rushed.

Data collection process followed ethical principles of accuracy and significance, e.g. pupils were given instructions, told about the aim of the questionnaire survey, time given to fill it out. The survey was anonymous and confidential to ensure reliability and validity of the research data.

### **Research instrument and procedure**

The questionnaire used for the research was designed based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1995) and using certain questions that had been previously used for the instrument of an international study on children's rights carried out in 1998 (Jonynienė & Černiauskienė, 2004).

Questionnaires with closed questions were distributed to research participants. The questionnaires were comprised of the following sections: demographic (research participants' gender, age, place of residence, place of the attended educational institution etc.) and informative section, aimed at revealing the respondents' opinion about the expression of their rights at school. The first part of the informative section presented 11 statements about pupil's rights, and the respondents were asked to indicate the importance of the statements to them according to 5 scores scale (0 to 4, where 0 means absolutely unimportant right, 4 – very important right). Pupils' duties were not presented for evaluation in this informative section.

The second part of the informative section of the questionnaire was intended for studying the situation of enforcement of pupils' rights and duties at school. The respondents were asked to evaluate each of the 16 statements about expression of the rights and duties at school according to 4 scores scale (0 to 3, where 0 – never, 3 – always).

The method of questionnaire survey, calculation of absolute and relative values, arithmetic mean and standard deviation (SD) were applied as a combination of qualitative and quantitative research for data collection, processing and evaluation.

### **Data analysis**

To identify 6-7 graders' opinion about the expression of children's rights at school, the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of children's rights to them. Prior to evaluating the rights, the respondents were asked whether or not they were introduced to children's rights at school, and if yes, in what way. 88% of pupils responded affirmatively. The rest of the respondents (12%) stated that no one introduced them specifically to the rights and duties, but they were aware of their rights. The results suggest that pupils are introduced to children's rights in schools, which usually happens during formal and informal activities, e.g. during various lessons, such as ethics, Lithuanian language, physical education, human safety. Lots of discussions with children about their rights, violation of rights and its prevention possibilities take place during class meeting hours.

In order to identify pupils' opinion about the importance of their rights, they were given 11 statements, which they were asked to evaluate according to 5 scores scale: 0 – absolutely unimportant, 1 – unimportant, 2 – somewhat important, 3 – important, 4 – very important (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** 6-7 graders' opinion about the importance of children's rights

| Pupil's rights   | N   | Minimum Value | Maximum Value | Mean (arithmetic) | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----|---------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Express own thoughts and opinion.   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.20              | 0.78               |
| 2. Participate in the activity of the educational institution.                         | 113 | 0             | 3             | 1.91              | 0.80               |
| 3. Be provided with comprehensive education.   | 113 | 1             | 3             | 2.46              | 0.69               |
| 4. Make own decisions (depending on the age).  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.12              | 0.80               |
| 5. Be healthy.   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.68              | 0.59               |
| 6. To healthy and safe environment.  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.58              | 0.68               |
| 7. To personal life, personal integrity and freedom.                                   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.31              | 0.81               |
| 8. To rest and leisure and entertainment, cultural life according to the specific age. | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.10              | 0.77               |
| 9. Have access to information.   | 113 | 1             | 3             | 2.43              | 0.63               |
| 10. To state support and maintenance.  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.03              | 0.92               |
| 11. Right to education.  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.73              | 0.62               |

The received data suggest that pupils view almost all children's rights listed in the table as very important, given high means of evaluation of almost all statements. The most important right for 6-7 graders is the right to education (2.73). Children's right to education is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992), The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2011), Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (1996) and other laws and legal acts. These documents point out that every child has the right to education, and education is obligatory to all children under 16. The results of the research have shown that a modern young person seems to realize and value the importance of education more. Pupils also gave priority to health, i.e. the right to be healthy (2.68), to healthy and safe environment (2.58). In general, it could be assumed that the children's right with the highest evaluation means are highly important for education, comprehensive development and socialization of teenagers.

6 and 7 graders find the right to participate in activity of the educational institution (1.91) as the least important. Although the Children's Welfare State Policy concept (2003) identifies children's participation as one of the objectives of securing children's welfare, i.e. depending on the level of maturity, children are provided with conditions and possibilities to actively participate in the life of the society, exercise their sociability and civic consciousness, in particular, their opinion is considered when making decisions that influence protection of children's welfare, providing all kinds of services to a child and family; scientific reviews and studies view a child as a representative target sample of the society. However, the real situation is somewhat different. Society tends to view children as having limited possibilities to participate in important decision making even when directly related to the children due to

their age. As a result, there are a lot of pupils who do not feel responsible for what happens at school, are excluded from important decision making, become passive in after-school activities.

Having analysed the opinion of 6-7 graders about the possibilities for expression of children's rights and duties at school (see Table 2), we can see that pupils gave the highest scores to the statements that they are encouraged to respect all people regardless of the religion, race, financial situation, appearance (2.58), receive explanations about what is good and what is bad (2.42), and there is a person they can address for assistance in learning (2.42).

**Table 2.** 6-7 graders' opinion about expression of children's rights and duties at school

| Enforcement of rights and duties in school   | N   | Minimum Value | Maximum Value | Mean (arithmetic) | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----|---------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Do adults treat you right?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.31              | 0.68               |
| 2. Do adults listen to you, provide advice?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.39              | 0.75               |
| 3. Do you feel protected against any situations that could hurt your feelings?                                       | 113 | 0             | 3             | 1.99              | 0.81               |
| 4. Can you influence decisions that are related to you?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.10              | 0.76               |
| 5. Do you feel protected against any situation that could physically hurt you?                                       | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.05              | 0.81               |
| 6. Do adults listen to you and respect your opinion?   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.18              | 0.77               |
| 7. Do you have access to information where a decision has to be made?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.28              | 0.74               |
| 8. Do you receive any explanations about assessment marks?   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.18              | 0.83               |
| 9. Do adults encourage you to respect all people, regardless of the religion, race, financial situation, appearance? | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.58              | 0.65               |
| 10. Do other people take interest in your talents and help develop them?   | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.19              | 0.76               |
| 11. Do you receive any explanation about what is good and what is bad, when needed?                                  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.42              | 0.69               |
| 12. Is there a person you can address if you need assistance in learning?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.42              | 0.74               |
| 13. Are your rights violated at school?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 1.04              | 0.94               |
| 14. Do you comply with your duties?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.33              | 0.65               |
| 15. Do adults remind you about your duties?  | 113 | 0             | 3             | 2.27              | 0.85               |
| 16. Do you notice any members of your school community not complying with their duties?                              | 113 | 0             | 3             | 1.50              | 0.96               |

The respondents gave favourable scores admitting that adults treated them right fairly equally (2.31), listen to them, gave advice (2.39). This is a very important moment, as children who are approached and socialize less do not feel secure and are subject to stress. A person who is under regular stress is not motivated to seek self-fulfilment, which may lead to negative consequences in the child's future life.

It is also important that children know why their knowledge is assessed by appropriate mark (2.18), are assisted in finding the right solution (2.28).

Nonetheless, the majority of pupils believe that their rights are violated at school (1.04). More than a quarter (27%) of the respondents think their rights are violated at school often or even always. 6-7 graders have indicated that they do not feel protected against situations that can hurt their feelings (1.99) and against situations that can hurt them physically (2.05). Assessments suggest that 6-7 graders do not feel adequately protected at school. For example, almost quarter of 6-7 graders feel emotionally secure seldom or never, and just above the fifth of them – physically secure. Among other causes, children's insecurity may also be related to school community members' occasional non-compliance with duties, as noted by the children (1.50).

### Conclusions

1. Analysis of legal and education-related documents that govern children's rights has suggested that children's rights have attained exclusive attention. However, studies described in the scientific literature have revealed that putting the ideas of children's rights in practice in Lithuanian schools is still very problematic.

2. The study has revealed that the right to education, the right to be healthy, the right to healthy and safe environment are viewed by 6-7 graders as the most important. These rights are of particular significance for teenagers' education, comprehensive development and socialization. The least important right to the teenagers is the right to participate in activities of the educational institution.

3. In general, 6-7 graders' opinions about the possibilities for expression of children's rights have shown that children are encouraged by school to respect all people regardless of the religion, race, financial status, or appearance. Pupil highly value the possibility to receive explanations about what is good and what is bad, rationale of certain assessment of their knowledge, and the possibility to address a person who can assist them in learning or making important decisions.

4. The study has shown that most of pupils still believe that their rights are violated at school often or even always. Pupils lack emotional and physical security when at school. Among other causes, children's insecurity may also be related to school community members' occasional non-compliance with duties, as has been noted by the pupils.

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### *Summary*

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Children's rights are a part of the human rights system. The level at which rights of this age group are safeguarded and protected in a country is among the specific indicators that signal about conditions of human rights, as this age group forms the part of society that is the most exposed to social and economic changes and the most vulnerable. There has been considerable improvement in certain areas of children's right protection on various levels of governance in the recent years; however, effective children's rights protection system is still one of the key strategic objectives for our country.

The article analyses 6-7 graders' opinion about the expression of children's rights at school. Controversy between children's rights declared in documents and their actual existence in a real child's life (at school in particular) has become the scientific problem of this article. Empirical research was carried out to verify the arguments provided in the scientific literature and study pupil's opinion about the expression of children's rights at school. The questionnaire used for the research was designed based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1995) and using certain questions that had been previously used for the instrument of an international study on children's rights carried out in 1998 (Jonynienė & Černiauskienė, 2004).

Analysis of legal and education-related documents that govern children's rights has suggested that children's rights have attained exclusive attention. However, studies described in the scientific literature have revealed that putting the ideas of children's rights in practice in Lithuanian schools is still very problematic. The study has shown that most of pupils still believe that their rights are violated at school often or even always. Pupils lack emotional and physical security when at school. Among other causes, children's insecurity may also be related to school community members' occasional non-compliance with duties, as has been noted by the pupils.