



April 2021 Commentary on Right to Education

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Education is not a one-size fits all. It was not pre-pandemic and will not be post-pandemic. Children have diverse needs and abilities that vary based on their individual contexts. Unfortunately, their diverse abilities and needs have not been fully considered nor have their voices been heard since the beginning of the pandemic. The continuous closure and reopening of schools with movement from in-person to online/virtual or hybrid education and changes in policies and regulations have shed light on the lack of understanding of the importance of education and equity and stability in education as well as the significance of clear messaging shared with children. This instability is threatening children's wellbeing, and their right to education; it is also widening the gap that existed pre-pandemic.

The right to education is often misunderstood; the notion that any type of education is better than no education is problematic and should not be accepted. Keeping in mind all the Articles in the CRC with emphasis on Articles 28 (right to education) and 29 (aims of education), education must be equitable, inclusive, and accessible with rights, respect, non-discrimination, safety, and participation at its core. An education that enables children to understand and exercise their rights and helps them develop their diverse abilities and critical thinking, expand their knowledge, and use their voice in a safe environment not only empowers them as individuals, but as integral members of their respective communities and the world that they live in and contribute to. For such an education to become a reality for all children as opposed to an aspiration, we need to address the inequities in education, ensure that children participate in all discussions regarding their education and safety and have the diverse contexts of children at the core of all planning and decision making. Decisions on matters that impact the lives of children taken on their behalf without their involvement do not suffice as they are the ones living the consequences.

What we have heard from children¹:

Children that we have spoken to about their thoughts on education during the pandemic shared their mixed feelings about attending school in person – while some are happy, others are not, but they all expressed certain concerns, frustrations, and fears:

- Fear of bringing COVID-19 to their loved ones as they have been labeled from the beginning of the pandemic as carriers and spreaders of the virus.
- Frustration due to the continuous changes to their routines and disruption of their education; the moment they get used to a system, it changes without anyone asking them what they think and want.
- Not being heard.
- Fear of being in school where they have to use shared facilities such as bathrooms.
- Fear of using public transportation to go to school.
- Lack of support and resources at school and frustration due to lack of activities and limitations on movement when schools are open.
- Concerns about constantly being tested and quarantining for COVID-19 when there are cases in their schools/classrooms/on school busses.
- Concerns with seeing their teachers struggle.
- Having to deal with the loss of loved ones.

In addition to actions outlined in the CCRC's alternative report [Close Systemic Gaps through Systemic Change: Implement Children's Rights in Canada](#) (2020), the CCRC is calling for immediate action that includes:

- A children's rights approach to education – whether it be in person, virtual or hybrid.
- Listening to and planning with children, teachers, school staff, parents/legal guardians, and medical professionals. No one should be forced to teach, work, or attend school while being afraid of getting sick or making others sick.
- More support for children with disabilities.
- Focus on the *quality* of education, which encompasses equitable practices from educational policies to classroom approaches and strategies, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, relevance and historical accuracy of current elementary and secondary school curricula, classroom sizes, child participation, child and human rights education, teacher training, access to basic and essential resources (e.g. educational materials/books, pens, paper, internet, laptops/iPads/computers), enhancing creativity and innovation, and equitable testing standards/approaches.
- Data collection across provinces and territories to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on education, and on children and teachers.

¹ We acknowledge that a small sample size is not reflective of the views of all children across Canada and qualitative research is required that examines the diverse contexts of children as well as public and private education and homeschooling.