Children's Right to Education: Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and A Canada Fit for Children

By Melinda Caputo Janhager

Good afternoon everyone,

I would first like to thank Mrs. Pearson for the opportunity to be here today. She's asked me to share some reflections from my own experience on the theme of education from the Canada Fit for Children document. I'm happy to have a chance to share a couple of my thoughts on this with you.

Before I go on though, I'd like to acknowledge what we've been hearing a lot about in the news lately that has to do with education – that is, the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Nigeria. Even though this crisis is happening in another part of the world, the media bring information about the lives of these girls who I'll never meet, into my life. These are schoolgirls around my age, who, like me, have a right, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to a safe environment in which to learn and grow. Just because my educational and other privileges have meant that safety and schooling have gone hand in hand for the most part, it doesn't mean that their experience is not connected to mine. I want us to remember these girls today because we are connected. Without safety and wellbeing for them attending schools in Nigeria, or for children attending schools in Canada, including Aboriginal children for example, I can hardly claim or feel confident that children's rights are being respected to the extent that they should be. And this has much to do with quality of education as well.

For me, then, quality of education and rights are the two aspects of the recommendations in the education theme section of the Canada Fit for Children document that I'd like to briefly address today. As you know, this document, developed after the 2002 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, is a plan of action for all Canadians to improve the lives of children in our country. The document calls specifically for quality education that provides students with the best possible learning materials and environments. It also calls for educating young people about their rights.

As I reflect on these recommendations, I see that I have benefited from a number of improvements made in the intervening ten years. For example, I have been part of a transition since the release of the CFC in the way that technology impacts my learning environments. By technology I mean the Smart boards that my teachers use, the time my English teacher gives us to Google things on our phones in class, the tweets I read from another teacher when he comes across an interesting tidbit to share, the e-books that allow me to scan and search passages and visit the library virtually rather than taking the time to physically travel to a library. This is all to say that technology has changed the way that education is delivered which poses a need for further support for teachers.

Another improvement has been youth participation in my schooling experience. This year I served on the Student Senate with Stephen who will speak in a few minutes. In my position as Student Senator, I met with representatives from every school in our board and had meaningful discussions about student participation in the education system. These discussions often resulted in input that we were able to make regarding various board policies. Essentially, what we did this year was based on the right to participation outlined in the UNCRC, that says that “children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with age and maturity.” Having Student Senates all around the country demonstrates this idea of student participation that was encouraged in a Canada Fit for Children.

During my time on student senate, I was also happy to learn about the UNICEF initiative called “Rights Respecting Schools” that is a school model that incorporates rights into all elements of schooling. Many schools across the UK have already used it and we have a pilot project in Canada. By implementing this program, the UK researchers have noticed many significant improvements in the quality of learning, especially in “reductions in bullying and exclusions and improved attendance”. I think that this is an interesting model for us to consider and it leads me to my final comment about the kind of rights education that I have experienced in my time in the school system.

One of the strong recommendations made in the CRC is that there should be increased public awareness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In my own experience I have had little formal opportunity to learn about the Convention in school. What I have learned has been mostly outside of school. I recall spending one class a month in grade 7 learning about

children's rights and the CRC and it was great. We watched videos and had engaging class discussions, but that was all. In high school, we discussed 'human rights' in my grade 10 civics class to a certain extent, but we did not focus specifically on children's rights or the Convention. When I have asked my friends if they know about the CRC or anything about children's rights, the answer is usually no. Here's where I think can be done to improve the quality of education and create a Canada that is truly Fit for Children. I think that learning about rights should not be a topic that is an "add on" and only if there is time in the curriculum. I think it should be part of every lesson because it's more than a topic of discussion. It's an approach to learning that teachers and students can work on right from kindergarten.

I believe that if children and young people are taught about rights, along with responsibilities, and schools are built on the values of respect, peace, care and equality through a rights-based approach, it seems to me that we would go a long way to honouring the recommendations made in A Canada Fit for Children. As the children said at the UN Special Session in New York in 2002, "We want a world fit for children because a world fit for us, is a world fit for everyone."

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