

# Golden Grove School: Children's Rights

Dr Nicola Chisnall Memorial Award 2020 Submission

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*Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*

*Success is not the work of one but the work of many.*

I started out as an English language teacher in Japan and then in New Zealand state schools. In both situations there was a high degree of top-down pedagogy, paperwork and expectations landing on the shoulders of teachers. Sometimes we were asked to teach a certain subject or topic in a specific way, as dictated by the government's education ministry. Not all these requirements would best serve the child, and yet as professionals we had to abide by the law.

It is from this experience that I endeavoured to bring this to the forefront of the 9-12 class at Golden Grove School. In the controversial words of Ronald Reagan, "The government is not the solution to our problems – government is the problem."

Let's take a few steps back.

The children in my classroom had often expressed an interest in politics, namely focusing their attention on the insidious speeches and acts of the infamous Donald Trump. Eventually their attention turned to the upcoming New Zealand General Elections. I observed their discussions and noticed that a lot of their opinions were based on what their parents believed, or they spoke lightly about current issues that required more consideration of their hidden depths. How could I help connect these children to the power of government and our MPs? How could I guide them to understand their place in this political arena?

In the beginning stage of this initiative, I set out to build a scaffold for my students. We refreshed our understanding of the differences between needs, wants and rights. We also briefly reviewed some of the purposes of government and occupations of political leaders. Then I presented the child-friendly version of the United Nations' five categories outlining Children's Rights: Health and Welfare; Education, Rest and Play; Participation and Freedom, Relationships and Care; Special Support.<sup>1</sup> We discussed each category before breaking into groups with the aim to collectively rank them from '1' being the most important and therefore requiring a larger budget, to '5' as the least important. The room buzzed with rich, meaningful conversation and the students passionately deliberated over which right should make the top spot. When we

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast (2016) *Public budgets: how governments should spend money for children's rights*, Available at: [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/10122/pdf/gc\\_iic\\_childfriendlyversion\\_english.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/10122/pdf/gc_iic_childfriendlyversion_english.pdf) (Accessed: 31.07.2020).

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came together later, no group had the exact same ranking. I asked them to unanimously decide upon a collective ranking as a whole class. Again, point and counterpoint fired around the class. After a heated and enthusiastic discussion, we established that a unanimous ranking would be seemingly impossible. In that conclusion, the children began to truly understand the day-to-day collision and coalition of political parties.

From there, I posed a different statement each day to the whole class for us to role play what may happen in parliament. Where topics needed more background information, I would supply it and the children took the discussion from there. I also integrated politics into our literacy circles to form the backbone of their persuasive essays. I said I'd act as an Hansard editor, recording their debates about issues such as delegation of funds into different areas, the value of human life versus other animals' lives, and whether children should have the right to vote in the New Zealand General Elections.

And whether they agreed with President Reagan. The intention was not to advocate anarchy but to guide children to stop and think, to look at the purpose of government and critically analyse whether ours is doing its job.

Throughout this experience, I have discovered an array of beautiful moments. A 12-year-old being floored by a newly transitioned 9-year-old's opinion and strong evidence that health and welfare eclipses all other rights. A shy 10-year-old speaking up against the popular opinion of the whole class. I have heard snippets of conversation over lunch, children animatedly exchanging philosophical ideas that have morphed from one of the statements we had just debated in class. And there was that long twenty minutes of a respectful back-and-forth between two students with polarised opinions.

I had anticipated that there may be some conflict, expecting that children may have become frustrated to the point of making things personal. No classroom culture is perfect, after all. But I was laughably wrong.

This whole experience has reminded me of the innately non-discriminating nature of the child. When the students were fully engaged and passionate, confidence and joy emanated from them. It was infectious to the point where children who would usually choose not to participate were keen to voice their opinion. Looking forward, I want to continue to closely observe their interactions during these oral debates and see if there are any connections to their motivation or fluency in literacy.

Upon reflection, I was reminded of the Māori whakataukī I have used in the introduction to my application for this award. It recognises the combined efforts of many are required to achieve success or complete a project, the importance of working as a collective. The children understood that their rights are related to how we live together in our communities and the importance of respecting the dignity and value of our peers.

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How apt that this whakataukī aligns with Montessori's work especially with children in the Second Plane. They develop through social interactions and have the power to reason. It is the role of the adult to give them opportunities to answer their "how" and "why" questions. This is a key explanation as to why I believe educating children on their rights was such a stimulating experience for them.

I'd love to see this fledgling initiative evolve into a political pathway for our school's tamariki, whether that looks like them writing to their MPs about issues that affect the rights of a child, or engaging with a community project and actively participating in local enterprises. They may decide to role play government and opposition in a mock parliamentary debate for an audience. They might want to hold a persuasive speech competition after watching young activists stand up for what they believe in. Or they could simulate a class election, voting booths and all.

Wherever they decide to take it, I will continue to follow them through this empowering experience.

They know their rights and are determined to stand up for them.