

Stamatovic, Jelena; Zunic Cicvaric, Jelena  
**Child rights in primary schools – the situation and expectations**  
*CEPS Journal 9 (2019) 1, S. 83-102*



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:  
Stamatovic, Jelena; Zunic Cicvaric, Jelena: Child rights in primary schools – the situation and expectations - In: CEPS Journal 9 (2019) 1, S. 83-102 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-171075  
<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-171075>

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## Child Rights in Primary Schools – The Situation and Expectations

JELENA STAMATOVIĆ\*<sup>1</sup> AND JELENA ŽUNIĆ CICVARIĆ<sup>2</sup>

∞ School is the most suitable place for students to learn about child rights and where these rights are to be respected. In the research we have conducted, the objective was to examine the knowledge of primary school students about the rights of the child and to obtain insight into how these rights are respected. Using an interview scaling technique, we questioned 351 final year primary school students and 231 teachers. The students did not rate their knowledge of child rights highly: they mostly expect teachers to provide them with information on child rights; the students obtain the majority of such information in the civic education classes, which is an optional subject and is not attended by all students, as well as in homeroom sessions. Teachers believe that it is the responsibility of homeroom teachers to familiarise students with the rights of a child. The rights to freedom of expression of students and their participation in decision-making are the least respected, according to both students and teachers. Furthermore, all believe that some forms of discrimination exist in schools. We have found especially significant suggestions and recommendations given by students and teachers to overcome the existing problems and provide better access to the rights of the child in school.

**Keywords:** child rights, The Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation, discrimination, education system of Serbia, elementary education

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## Otrokove pravice v osnovnih šolah – položaj in pričakovanja

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JELENA STAMATOVIĆ IN JELENA ŽUNIĆ CICVARIĆ

Šola je najprimernejši prostor, v katerem se učenci učijo o otrokovih pravicah in v katerem jih je treba spoštovati. Cilj izvedene raziskave je bil ugotoviti znanje učencev osnovne šole o otrokovih pravicah in pridobiti vpogled, kako so te pravice spoštovane. Z uporabo tehnike intervjuja z razvrščanjem smo izprašali 351 učencev, ki so bili v zadnjem letu osnovne šole, in 231 učiteljev. Učenci niso visoko vrednotili svojega znanja o človekovih pravicah: predvsem so pričakovali, da jim bodo učitelji zagotovili informacije o otrokovih pravicah; učenci so pridobili večino teh informacij pri pouku državlanskega izobraževanja, ki je izbirni predmet in ni namenjen vsem učencem, pa tudi pri razrednih urah. Učitelji verjamejo, da je odgovornost razrednih učiteljev, da seznanijo učence o pravicah otrok. Glede na odgovore učiteljev in učencev so najmanj spoštovane pravice učencev glede svobode izražanja in njihovega sodelovanja pri odločanju. Vsi verjamejo, da v šolah obstajajo nekatere oblike diskriminacije. Posebej pomembni se nam zdijo predlogi in priporočila učencev in učiteljev za prevlado obstoječih problemov in boljše zagotavljanje otrokovih pravic v šoli.

**Ključne besede:** otrokove pravice, Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah, participacija, diskriminacija, šolski sistem v Srbiji, osnovnošolsko izobraževanje

## Introduction

As a social institution, school influences the environment by its actions and, in line with social expectations, it also allows individual development and the development of students' potential and their overall personalities. School is the basic context of growing up in modern society; it is the place where children are prepared for independent living in the community (Pešić, 1999). This approach involves the participation of students in school life and work. Vidović and his collaborators see the child's participation as a process directed to shared responsibility and mutual activities among students, as well as among students and adults (Vidović et al., 2000). In this context, school is the most suitable place for students to become familiar with the rights of the child, but also the place where their rights are to be respected. The question follows why it is especially important to observe the implementation of child rights in the education system? One reason is that all children go through the education system and spend a large part of their childhood there. Some children spend more time in school than with their own families. Since it is compulsory, all children go through the education system, (or most of them do so), therefore it affects the development and learning of almost all children in one country over a longer period. It is, therefore, essential that the education system and its institutions be based upon impeccable respect for the rights of the child.

### Child rights in the education system

Analysing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, one can recognise the tendency of seeing a child as an active participant in the process of his/her development (Vranješević, 2006). Child development assumes encouraging, providing conditions for thriving but also protection from various forms of threats, as defined by the convention. In terms of development, it promotes the development of a child in accordance with his/her abilities and autonomy. Child development is emphasised through protection, fostering development possibilities and strengthening participatory roles in their own development (Landsdowne, 2005). The participation of children is an essential condition for development; it means taking into account their development possibilities and encouraging children to participate in decisions that affect them.

For decades, different perspectives on understanding children and childhood based on theories and research in biological and social sciences have been re-examined. However, the human rights perspective resting on ethical and legal principles can be an equally valid one (Woodhead, 2012, p. 52).

Most of the dominant development and psychological theories contain the idea of a child as an active participant in the process of his/her development, starting from Bruner who states that a child is a creator of meaning to many studies support that concept (Vranješević, 2013).

The concept of child rights is founded in humanistic pedagogy and psychology that represent the 'philosophical notion of education of a complex and complete personality', according to its founders Maslow, Rogers, and Steiner. They start off from the personality as the essential characteristic of a human being, from human dignity and the developmental needs of the individual. The basic concepts of humanistic education are found in the pursuit of pedagogy towards humanism, democracy, and the building of civil society. The core interests of humanistic pedagogy include the problems of personality and its development, activity, creativity, autonomy, self-actualisation, freedom of choice, responsibility and orientation towards higher goals and values, all of which are essential foundations that have been incorporated into the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the humanistic approach, one can recognise positive orientation in education, with an emphasis on positive human abilities rather than educational problems such as violence, behavioural disorders, developmental and learning difficulties, and the like (Bognar & Simel, 2013, p. 143). Furthermore, the perceptions of humanistic pedagogy are directed towards an individual, present, autonomy, experience, and personal values. Based on this essential feature, the individual seen as a priority, the very name of it the convention insists on the child as an individual, and thus the name of the convention is *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the rights of each) and not the *Convention on the Rights of the Children* (the rights of the group). The Convention is an international precedent because the focus is placed on the rights of every single child thus providing a non-paternalistic attitude towards that child (Cohen, 2001).

A core characteristic of humanistic education is participation, that is, the implementation of the child rights from the corpus of participatory rights: transferring of responsibility onto children, attributing the ability to judge to children, i.e., making decisions regarding the content of activities, learning (Bašić, 2009). Glasser considers the promotion of freedom of choice in learning to be particularly important so that it could help in aiding students in finding those activities for which they are motivated (Glasser, 2005). In education, teachers should be 'focused on positive abilities of a child and thus help him/her to create a positive image of him/herself' (Bognar & Simel, 2013, p. 143).

The education system, through its core business of the education of children, has a significant impact on their development and thus is in the direct function of exercising *the right to education* and *the right to adequate quality of*

*education*. Because almost all children are involved in this system, spend a large part of their childhood there and generate intense relationships with their peers and teachers, the education system naturally raises the demand for respect of every right of the child (Chür, 2015). This requirement raises the responsibility to organise the education system so that all the rights of the child are respected in all circumstances. In addition to the preceding, the education system has an essential role in relation to child rights and obligations of the States parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In relation to the nature and resources of the education system, in the context of educational activities, an opportunity is given, and an obligation is imposed to inform children about their rights and to influence raising awareness about the importance of respecting the rights of the child in all aspect of society. Finally, one of the basic assumptions of full realisation and respect of child rights is that children, in addition to learning about their rights, have the opportunity to practice them, i.e., to 'live' them. Educational institutions are ideal places for the practical implementation of child rights. Having intense relationships with their peers and adults, children in educational institutions have the opportunity to develop practical skills by which they contribute to the observance of child rights and prepare for the role of active citizens in a democratic society. This particularly applies to the development of tolerant attitudes towards diversity, peaceful conflict resolution, the practice of the rights that belong to the corpus of civil and political rights, especially the right to participation. However, this potential can be used only if the organisation is such that all stakeholders are familiar with the child rights and implement them in practice.

The Republic of Serbia has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and thereby undertook to: harmonise national legislation with the convention; improve the position of the child in all aspects of life (hence the improvement of their position in the education system); inform children about their rights; report periodically to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the achievement of rights under the aforementioned items.

The issue of child rights in the education system in the Republic of Serbia is roughly defined by legal and normative documents. The Law on the Foundations of Education regulates the general guidelines on child rights under the Convention. Normative documents define specific implementation issues. Here, we will mention the legislation on standards of quality of work of educational institutions, which defines specific standards and indicators relating to the rights of the child; the legislation of competency standards for the teaching profession; which the roles of a teacher that contribute implementation of child rights; and the legislation on standards of competence of the educational

institution directors, which also recognises definitions directed to respect for the rights of the child.

### **Approaches to the research of child rights**

The question of child rights in education is an issue that is very current but not much studied. Approaches to the research of these issues can be classified as those relating to research dealing with the realisation of child rights in education and research and access to education for the rights of the child in school. When it comes to research on the realisation of child rights in education, there has not been many studies on this topic since the adoption of the convention on the rights of the child. The most significant studies of certain rights in the education system: the assessment of achievement of participatory rights in school (Jerome et. al., 2015; Kravarušić, 2014; Pešić & Tomanović, 1999; Vranješević, 2013) and to protection from violence and neglect (Popadić, 2009).

Research and approaches to education for the rights of the child in school (and intercultural education, education for peace) were the subject of the research of Pešikan and Marinković studying education about/for/through the rights of the child in the teaching of science and society in the lower grades of primary school (Marinković, 2004; Pešikan, 2003). The Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad places significant emphasis on the study of intercultural relations, the development of intercultural skills and competencies in children, models of professional development for teachers for intercultural education, etc. Substantial research in this area was conducted at the Department for Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad within the project 'Models of professional teachers - Development for intercultural education' and 'The European dimension of changes in the education system in Serbia'. This research was focused on the analysis of existing forms of education for human rights and intercultural education in the content of the school subject of civic education and other aspects of the implementation of this subject (Gajić, 2009). There were also some studies indicating interconnection of the contents of certain school subjects and the rights of the child. Some studies analysed literature for children in terms of gender equality and political correctness (Stefanović & Glamočak, 2008). The research conducted by Batarelo and associates indicates that '... the students' knowledge of the concepts of democratic citizenship was contributed most by the Croatian language, and then History' (2010, p. 11). The study states that the human rights contents are present in literary texts/readers in the lower grades and that the students are encouraged to think about them through actions of the characters. Todres and Higinbotham explore children's

literature examining what children learn about their rights, the rights of others, the role of the rights in a democratic society in a broader sense. He studies the ways children perceive the rights through their favourite books and texts and how they adopt the themes present in children's literature: discrimination, exploitation, loneliness, fear, abandonment, child participation, etc. (Todres & Higinbotham, 2013).

## Method

The study of the capacity of schools for the implementation of child rights in the education system is a project of the Uzice Centre for Child Rights in the Republic of Serbia, the goal of which is to establish a sustainable capacity for education for child rights. The first stage of the project was focused on examination knowledge and implementation of child rights in schools and applied an empirical non-experimental method. Part of this research is presented in this paper.

In studying the problem of schools' capacity for educating children to recognise and achieve their rights, we used an empirical non-experimental method. Specifically, the objectives of our research were to determine how children evaluate the quality of their knowledge and skills related to child rights acquired at schools to examine the extent to which child rights are respected at school and to determine if the right to participation and non-discrimination is achieved and how.

The research sample consisted of 351 students of senior grades of primary school; 51% were students of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 49% students of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The structure of the sample by gender is 170 boys (48.43%) and 181 girls (51.57%). Furthermore, 231 teachers in elementary schools were examined: 32.50% of teachers in the junior grades and 67.50% of teachers in the older grades

The instrumentation applied was specifically designed for this research. The questionnaire for students consisted of 21 questions the objective of which was to determine ways in which students were introduced to child rights, as well as the degree of realisation of child rights in school. The instrument is a combination of questionnaire with questions and offered answers (13 questions), an five open questions and a scale of Likert type (the degree of agreement in scale: 1-I completely disagree, 2- generally disagree, 3- indecisive, 4- generally agree, 5- I agree fully) and questions related to the impact assessment (2 questions with the offered estimates 1 - there is no, 2 - there is very little there, 3 is on average, 4 - very much exists, 5- fully exists).

The questionnaire for teachers consisted of 10 questions relating to the methods of educating students about child rights and the respect of the same



rights in school. In the questionnaire, there are questions with offered answers (3 questions) and open questions (7 questions).

Data processing was done with SPSS 20. In addition to descriptive statistics, measures that show the relationship between variables ( $\chi^2$  test and t-test) were used.

## Results and discussion

Starting from the belief that a child should participate in his/her own development, the role of school is to encourage and guide children's development, respecting their developmental abilities and needs (Landsdown, 2005; Vranješević, 2006;). Evaluating the basic knowledge necessary to understand and implement child rights, students rated statements about that knowledge from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 5 (I strongly agree) as follows: they believe that they received the most knowledge about their culture ( $M = 3.93$ ), followed by knowledge that prepares them for life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, and equality with all people ( $M = 3.88$ ), knowledge of tolerance toward individuals who belong to other cultures, ethnicities and religions ( $M = 3.73$ ), knowledge and skills on their rights and the rights of others ( $M = 3.72$ ), knowledge of other cultures and languages of other ethnicities ( $M = 3.71$ ), knowledge on how to defend their rights and the rights of others ( $M = 3.61$ ), whereas the lowest rate was assigned to the knowledge, skills and responsibility for environmental protection ( $M = 3.55$ ). Based on these results, we can observe that students did not rate the knowledge of their rights and the rights of others, nor the knowledge on how to defend their rights and the rights of others, very highly in comparison to other kinds of knowledge. Knowledge related to one's culture and other cultures was rated highly. Some authors believe that school should reflect the current cultural diversity of the society and thus help students to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will allow them to function cross-culturally (Zuković & Milutinović, 2008, p. 530). If we compare these evaluations in relation to students' gender, the results show that there is a statistically significant difference of 0.05 only in the case of the statement that relates to the development of a tolerant relationship with people who belong to different cultures, ethnicities and religions. Boys and girls assessed the knowledge required to understand and implement child rights approximately the same, except a difference in the statement school helped me develop a tolerant relationship with individuals who belong to other cultures, ethnicities and religions, where girls rated the role of school more highly than boys did.

Table 1

*Student evaluation of knowledge and skills required to understand and implement child rights*

Statements about student knowledge	Gender	N	M	SD	
I acquired sufficient knowledge, skills and responsibility related to environmental protection in school	M	169	3.56	1.14	t = .148 df = 345 sig = 0.883
	F	178	3.54	1.01	
I acquired sufficient knowledge and skills related to my rights and the rights of others in school	M	168	3.65	1.04	t = -1.218 df = 344 sig = .224
	F	178	3.78	.96	
I learned to defend my rights and the rights of others in school	M	168	3.62	1.11	t = .121 df = 343 sig = .904
	F	177	3.61	1.16	
I acquired sufficient knowledge of my culture in school	M	163	3.98	1.01	t = 0.886 df = 336 sig = 0.376
	F	175	3.88	1.09	
I acquired sufficient knowledge of the language and culture of other ethnic groups in school	M	163	3.77	1.10	t = 0.989 df = 333 sig = .323
	F	172	3.65	1.04	
School helped me develop a tolerant relationship with individuals who belong to different cultures, ethnicities and religions	M	167	3.60	1.23	t = -2.038 df = 333 sig = .042
	F	176	3.86	1.11	
School prepares me for life in a tolerant society	M	167	3.81	1.22	t = -.219 df = 342 sig = 0.827
	F	177	3.84	1.10	

Nearly a half of the students who participated in the research believe that they have sufficient knowledge of child rights (42.20%), 28.70% think that they have average knowledge of them, and 18.70% think that they know only the basics of child rights; 6.00% of students claim that they do not know anything about this, whereas 4.30% believe themselves to be 'experts' in child rights. Girls think they have more knowledge of child rights than boys do. Statistical indicators confirm this: specifically, values  $\chi^2 = 12.948$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .012$ , and Cramér's V index is .19, which show a small association between variables. The greatest difference is observed for the statement that they know only the basics of child rights, in the boys' favour, and in the statement that they know a lot about child rights in the girls' favour

The following results show how students see the responsibility of adults in informing them about child rights and who is, in their opinion, the most responsible for informing them about their rights; 36.61% of students believe that teachers hold the greatest responsibility in this respect, 27.86% believe it is the

school counsellor and the psychologist, followed by parents (23.36%), homeroom teacher (16.81%), school principal (7.69%), school as a whole (5.70%) and civic education teachers (5.65%). Students commonly expect school employees to provide information and knowledge on the rights of the child, although one in four students also expects information from his/her parents. Teachers answered the same question as follows: 45.69% think that the homeroom teacher holds the greatest responsibility in informing students about child rights, the same percentage of teachers believe that the responsibility lies with the counseling and psychological service, 28.45% think that all teachers should inform children about their rights, 22.41% believe that it is the role of parents, 7.33% of teachers name school administration and 1.72% name the media. Teachers also primarily see school or more precisely, its employees as the agents who should inform students about their rights, but most teachers don't recognise the necessity and responsibility of all teachers to inform and help students acquire knowledge of their rights, and almost a half of teachers see this as the sole responsibility of homeroom teachers.

The responsibility of school in the modern society is to create conditions in which students will adopt knowledge and skills necessary to accept universal values, overcome stereotypes, and develop intercultural relationships (Banks et al., 2001; David, 2002). This approach underscores the importance of school and the education system as one of the key and most efficient factors in familiarising children with their rights, sharing information about child rights, and raising awareness of the importance of child rights and their implementation in the society as a whole, which is one of the measures for the implementation of child rights defined under Article 4 of the convention.

We observed the way in which students are educated about their rights in relation to the observations and experiences of students and in relation to teachers' opinions. Students stated their opinions about the way in which they obtained information about child rights. Most obtained information in school (78.30%), and slightly more than half said that they obtained this kind of information from parents (53.00%). A number of students named the media (27.50%) and other sources outside the school (information obtained through books and brochures or receive information from friends). This indicates that students are interested in learning more about this topic, which is why they seek information from other sources apart from school and parents. Assuming that school is responsible for educating students about their rights, we wanted to know which organisational forms of school activities offer substantial knowledge to students and develop their skills and capacities for the understanding and application of knowledge in this area. Students stated that most content

about child rights is presented in civic education classes, followed by homeroom sessions, less in regular classes and extracurricular activities, while child rights are the least talked about in specialised activities, such as forums, school campaigns, etc. (Table 2). Bearing in mind that civic education is an elective course, students who do not choose this course will not have access to this kind of information. However, homeroom sessions and regular classes include the entire student body, so they can still learn about child rights in these classes.

Table 2

*Organisational forms of school activities in which content related to child rights is presented*

Organisational forms of school activities	Yes	No
Regular classes that cover all courses from the curriculum	67 19.10%	284 80.90%
Elective course – civic education	184 52.40%	167 47.60%
Homeroom sessions	160 45.60%	191 54.40%
Extracurricular activities (school clubs, student parliament, etc.)	67 19.10%	284 80.90%
Forums, lectures, school campaigns, peer education	41 11.70%	310 88.90%

The responsibility of school and teachers for the education of children about their rights requires teachers to be familiar with this area and to know how to implement it in the school programme. Teachers evaluated the requirements and system solutions that would ensure a quality approach to the issue of child rights, rating their agreement or disagreement with the offered statements on a five-degree scale. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

*Differences in teachers' attitudes about the requirements for realisation of school activities related to child rights in relation to the workplace (teachers in the junior grades and teachers in the senior grades.)*

Statements	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	
Respecting child rights in school is very important	229	2.00	5.00	4.67	.59	F = .694 df = 218 p = .675
Teachers should be more familiar with child rights	226	1.00	5.00	3.84	1.14	F = .420 df = 215 p = .488
Learning about child rights should be a part of the regular curriculum in initial teachers' training	230	1.00	5.00	4.03	1.02	F = 0.152 df = 81.034 p = .880
Learning about child rights should be in the regular primary school curriculum	231	1.00	5.00	3.89	1.03	F = -1.369 df = 84.116 p = .175

Teachers mostly agree that respecting child rights in school is very important, but there is disagreement about whether teachers should better familiarise themselves with child rights or not, although they do believe that teachers should be taught about child rights during initial teachers' education. It is not surprising that teachers highly rated the need to develop competencies related to child rights and their implementation, given that the *Rulebook on Competency Standards for Teachers* obliges them to do so. The third place belongs to the statement that learning about child rights should be a part of the regular school curriculum. Comparing these attitudes based on the statistical indicators (T-test and F-test), we can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of teachers who teach in junior and senior grades of primary school.

One of the research questions from which we started this research is the extent to which child rights are respected in school and the way in which the rights to participation and non-discrimination are realised. We observed these categories from the student's perspective and analysed teachers' suggestions for improving this area.

Students assessed the degree to which their rights are protected in school (Table 4).

**Table 4**  
*Student evaluation on the protection of child rights in school*

Child rights	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Life and physical integrity	343	1.00	5.00	3.70	1.22
Non-discrimination	279	1.00	5.00	3.42	1.29
Healthcare	346	1.00	5.00	3.89	1.17
Care of the adults	347	1.00	5.00	3.76	1.23
Quality education	344	1.00	5.00	4.01	1.12
Freedom of expression	280	1.00	5.00	3.45	1.29
Respect for their opinion	346	1.00	5.00	<b>3.28</b>	1.20
Being informed about important things	347	1.00	5.00	3.74	1.11
Freedom of association	338	1.00	5.00	3.70	1.15
Leisure time, recreation and playing	345	1.00	5.00	3.74	1.23
Culture and art	345	1.00	5.00	3.78	1.16
Freedom of religion	348	1.00	5.00	4.02	1.14
National culture and language	345	1.00	5.00	4.01	1.56
Privacy and protection of property	347	1.00	5.00	3.65	1.28
Protection from violence	345	1.00	5.00	3.57	1.41
Protection from drugs	346	1.00	5.00	3.82	1.40
Protection from trafficking of children	348	1.00	5.00	<b>4.04</b>	1.37

Based on these results, we can see that protection against the trafficking of children in school received the highest ratings by students, whereas the respect for their opinion received the lowest. The first five rights by ratings are: protection from the trafficking of children, freedom of religion, national culture and language, quality education and healthcare. The five rights that received the lowest ratings are: respect for students' opinions, right to non-discrimination, freedom of expression, protection from violence, and the right to privacy. Respect for the child's opinion and the right to non-discrimination are two of four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that oblige countries that signed the convention, including school as an institution, to respect, support, protect and educate children about their rights, so the question is raised about whether schools realise this role, given that children do not believe that their rights are sufficiently respected. Freedom of expression, another of the rights that students believe not to be sufficiently respected, is an integral element of the participation rights, and the lack of protection against violence often occurs as the consequence of discrimination. Things that students listed as least achieved in regard to child rights indicate the seriousness of the problem

and impose an obligation for those who deal in the organisation and realisation of educational activities in school to put more effort in planning activities that will help create conditions conducive to the recognition and respect for child rights.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is focused on encouraging development in accordance with one's abilities, but also participation in one's own development, which implies the freedom of expression and the respect for students' opinions. Students did not rate their right to protection from violence very highly, given the existence of the government programme *School Without Violence*, which has been implemented in a number of schools, as well as the *Special Protocol for the Protection of Children and Students against Violence, Abuse and Neglect in Educational Institutions* designed for all employees in education and parents for the purpose of preventing and solving the problem of violence. Analysing the problem of violence, Popadić thinks that school is an ideal place for programmes for reducing violence among school children to be easily implemented (2009, p. 236).

When it comes to participation in making decisions regarding the life and activities of school, about a half of students who participated in the research (49.30%) believe that participation is present, 24.20% of students are not aware that they can participate in decision-making, whereas the same percentage of students (24.20%) thinks that students are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process. Based on these results, we can conclude that not all students are allowed to participate in making decisions that affect them.

Students estimate that they are most involved in making decisions outside regular classes, in remedial and additional classes ( $M = 3.49$ ), extracurricular activities ( $M = 3.43$ ) and school clubs ( $M = 3.39$ ), followed by decisions within regular classes concerning the organisation ( $M = 2.27$ ), decisions about the organisation of space ( $M = 2.71$ ), and decisions concerning content ( $M = 2.54$ ). Finally, they think that they are least involved in making decisions regarding school management, especially the segment related to school rules ( $M = 2.06$ ). School rules, particularly those that exclusively apply to students, should be the result of a joint effort of students and teachers, which implies student participation. Analysing students' opinions on whether the adopted rules apply to all students, without exceptions, we obtained the following results: 76.10% of students believe that they do, 12.80% of students think that the rules do not apply to all students equally, whereas 10.00% do not know.

A fundamental question that should be analysed regarding child rights is discrimination. School as an educational institution should encourage the mental and cognitive development of students through its activity. Therefore,

teachers should enable and teach students to respect certain values, universal values, such as the prohibition of discrimination. Table 5 shows how students see the respect for non-discrimination in school.

Table 5  
*Discrimination in school and its causes*

Causes of discrimination in school	Yes	Sometimes	No	I don't know	Total
Age	42 12.00%	91 25.90%	170 51.00%	33 9.40%	345
Gender	34 9.70%	52 16.80%	241 68.70%	19 5.40%	346
Physical abilities	116 33.00%	109 31.10%	92 26.20%	31 8.80%	348
Race	84 23.90%	63 17.90%	179 51.00%	22 6.30%	348
Ethnicity	88 25.10%	77 21.90%	145 41.30%	34 9.70%	344
Religion	66 18.80%	59 16.80%	174 49.60%	47 13.40%	346
Political beliefs	22 6.30%	24 6.80%	220 62.70%	82 23.40%	348
Financial condition	62 17.70%	94 26.80%	157 44.70%	34 9.70%	347
Physical appearance	108 30.80%	91 25.90%	119 33.90%	27 7.70%	345
Social background	42 12.00%	61 17.40%	169 48.10%	70 19.90%	342
Parents' status	50 14.20%	77 21.90%	183 52.10%	38 10.80%	348

Based on these results, we can see that in each category that indicates a cause, i.e., personal trait, there is a certain number of students who believe that this trait is the cause for discrimination. Students think that physical abilities, physical appearance, and ethnicity are the major causes of discrimination, whereas children this the least discrimination occurs based on their political beliefs, gender, and social background.

Examining teachers' opinions on which child rights are least respected in school, the results show that teachers most frequently stated the right to protection from discrimination, then the right to freedom of expression and the right to participate in decision-making. Students and teachers alike believe that there are varying degrees of discrimination in school in different categories; therefore, the child right to protection from discrimination is not sufficiently



respected. This opinion is shared by both teachers and students. In addition, teachers and students state the freedom of expression and participation in decision-making, i.e., 'respecting students' opinions as their participation rights, as the least respected child rights in school.

Teachers believe that the most respected child rights in school are the right to education, the right to freedom of expression (unlike students, who think it is one of the least respected rights), then protection from discrimination (which was also stated as one the least respected rights by students), the right to leisure, recreation and playing and protection of children from violence, also listed among insufficiently respected rights by students. Here, we can see a difference in perceptions and identifications of child rights, as well as in perceived ways to violate these rights and mechanisms of protection.

Bearing in mind students' needs related to knowledge about child rights and their implementation in everyday school life and activities, it is necessary to learn what it is that students suggest as solutions for improved access to knowledge about their rights and its implementation. Analysing their essay answers, we attempted to classify their proposals into several categories: direct and indirect introduction to children's rights (education, activities and topics in class, conversations with teachers about children's rights). Teachers also gave their proposals about child rights and how to deal with them, and their answers are also classified into several categories: through regular curriculum, through various forms of extracurricular activities, through specialised teacher training in this area, by introducing parents to the rights and duties of their children, by organising peer education and by enabling students to participate more in decision-making on critical issues of their school life.

The survey conducted by Vranješević (2013) lists the areas about which children should be informed in school concerning their participation. These include the house rules of the school, all about the rights and protection of the rights, things related to school life, life in the classroom, extracurricular activities, evaluation and criteria for evaluation.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

In relation to its primary purpose and activity, i.e., education of children, the education system has a great responsibility in creating the conditions conducive to the realisation of child rights defined under the convention. School and its teachers can become significant promoters of child rights; in other words, they can continuously and directly support child rights and guide their students toward the realisation of their rights.

There are four principles in the convention without which we cannot ensure implementation of other rights: *life, survival and development* (Article 6); *the best interests of the child* (Article 3); *participation* (Article 12) – the child has the right to freely express his/her opinion and the right to have his opinion taken into account in matters and procedures that affect him; *non-discrimination* (Article 2) – all rights apply to all children without discrimination (Vučković-Šahović, 2011). The results of the conducted research show the degree and ways of achieving these principles from the standpoint of teachers and students. Students did not rate their knowledge of child rights and on how to protect their rights very highly, although the majority of them consider school to be the most responsible source for providing information about the rights of the child. Article 5 of the Convention defines the obligation of adults to provide children with appropriate guidance and counselling on how to achieve their rights, including knowledge and information about child rights. Teachers are expected to provide children with information and knowledge on child rights, but one in four students expects to receive this kind of information from their parents as well. This opinion is shared by teachers, although many of them do not recognise that every teacher is responsible for helping students acquire the knowledge of their rights. Instead, they believe that the greatest responsibility lies with the homeroom teacher. In relation to this, the answer that students obtain the most information in civic education classes, followed by homeroom sessions, regular classes and extracurricular activities, and the least information in specialised activities, such as forums, school campaigns, etc. is not surprising. A systematic approach to curriculum development in the field of child rights would require the development of an active approach in all school activities that would activate all resources for obtaining information, adopting knowledge of child rights, and creating the conditions in which children would be able to freely 'exert' their rights. This requires specific teachers' competencies and their openness for continuous improvement. However, the results of this research show that teachers believe they do not need any additional knowledge in this field, but also that they expect to learn about child rights during initial teachers' education.

Participation in decision-making has a stimulating effect on the development of the child, because he/she is more willing to accept responsibility for things in which he/she participates. Students state that the rights related to participation (respect for their opinions, freedom of expression and the right to privacy) are the least respected rights in school. Teachers have a similar opinion, because they think that the right to freedom of expression and opinion and the right to participation are least respected. In addition, teachers and

students recognise certain forms of discrimination in school. The question of recognising and experiencing discrimination requires one to be familiar with child rights, methods of protection against it, and the conditions and circumstances that lead to their violation. Discrimination includes any form of prejudice, exclusion, restriction or preference based on a personal trait, the purpose of which is to violate or negate human rights and fundamental freedoms. The goal of modern education is focused on the equal treatment of every student and developmental encouragement in accordance with their capabilities and potential. Therefore, the role of the school is to act preventively and provide the conditions conducive to non-discrimination and respect for the child right to non-discrimination.

Based on the results of this research, we recognise space for overcoming identified deficiencies from the standpoint of teachers and students and in relation to all four aforementioned principles of the convention, and recommendations and methods for a better approach to child rights suggested by teachers and students are particularly relevant here. Specifically, potential solutions are focused on the knowledge of child rights acquired in different ways, allowing children to participate in the life and activities of school, enhancing the curriculum with content from this field, as well as a constructive approach to existing curriculum content that can help in acquiring knowledge of child rights, but also a continuous improvement of teachers in this field and peer education in the knowledge, implementation and realisation of child rights in the school environment and the child's life.

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