

## Democracy and children's right to self-expression in lower secondary school

### Democracia y el derecho a la expresión del alumnado de educación secundaria

Anna Babicka-Wirkus<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pomeranian University in Slupsk, email: [ankababicka@gmail.com](mailto:ankababicka@gmail.com)

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1292-7351>

**Abstract:** The article presents and analyzes part of research outcomes, which was conducted in two lower secondary school in Poland. It rises issue of the level of respect the children's right to self-expression at school as a key element of development democratic environment in education and create empowerment among students Giving children the opportunity to exercise their right is a key element in a democratic society.

**Key words:** children rights, self-expression, school, democracy, adolescence, students' voice

**Resumen:** El artículo presenta y analiza parte de los resultados de la investigación, que se llevó a cabo en dos escuelas secundarias de Polonia. Se plantea la cuestión del nivel de respeto del derecho de los niños a la autoexpresión en la escuela como un elemento clave del desarrollo democrático en la educación y el empoderamiento entre los estudiantes Darles a los niños la oportunidad de ejercer sus derechos es un elemento clave en una sociedad democrática.

**Palabras clave:** derechos del niño, autoexpresión, escuela, democracia, adolescencia, voz del alumnado.

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### Introduction

Peter McLaren stresses that democracy begins in school (2015, p. 188). This is a crucial environment in which democracy should be practiced through everyday experiences. Nevertheless this school vision emphasizes the voice as a basic value, creating a democratic sphere. Being able to speak, using your own voice and expressing yourself are key issues in the process of empowerment.

Self-expression is a conspicuous notion upon which democracy is built. It is essential for the development of a democratic society and it is required for each individual's self-actualization. This is why rebelliousness and controversy are inscribed in the act of free self-expression (Waclawczyk, 2009). Because of its significance for the development of a human being as an independent entity, self-expression has entered the list of human and children's rights. The right to self-expression is not explicitly written in documents which are essential for children and human rights. Although we can find references to this law in articles 12, 13 and 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In The Constitution of the Republic of Poland article 54 says: *The freedom to express opinions, to acquire and to disseminate information shall be ensured to everyone.* This situation discloses the importance of this right for both a human and citizen's development. At the same time, these are only legal records which, (Babicka-Wirkus, 2016, 2015) are unrestricted in daily life.

The right to self-expression belongs to the group of *soft* rights, violating them does not result in any penal or moral sanctions (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1997). For this reason, it is often trampled on in relation to adults as well as children. In this context, the issue of attention given by adults to children and young people's opinions and views is growing in importance (Fielding 2004a, b, 2001; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Mary John claims that adults often do not pay enough attention to the message sent by children. They pretend to listen, which results in lack of understanding and conflicts (John, 2006). In order for young people to be truly free and able to question the demands of the authority, they have to experience the respect for the right to self-expression or, as Giroux (2001) would define it, the right to use one's *own voice*. Depreciating young people's freedom of self-expression is conducive to reproducing the social system and shaping the masses who are *without a voice*. As Paulo Freire (2000, p.77) said: *Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about 'reality', does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication which is based on self-expression.*

The aim of this paper is to present the level of respecting children's right to self-expression in lower secondary schools in Poland. The research focuses on diagnosing the level of respect the students' right to self-expression in school that is essential to building a democratic environment in school culture. This issue is significant, especially if we talk about democracy in school, because it is based on respecting children and human rights in everyday situations. Among daily practice teachers should prepare students to live as real citizens, who would know that without active participation there is no democracy. Goele Cornelissen

(2011, p. 27-28) stress (...) *the public role of teachers, today, is to create powerful learning environments that offer for each individual students different pathways to take or different doors to enter so as to become a competent, flexible and adaptable learner in an inclusive learning society.*

### Why self-expression matters?

Self-expression is an expression of one's own thoughts and feelings. It can be accomplished through words, choices or actions (Kim, Ko, 2011). Self-expression happens via real and symbolic signs. It is accompanied by constant verification/clarification of meaning. If necessary, the means of expression will change. Receiving feedback concerning the message is crucial for the process of *becoming* a person (May, 1995). Self-expression is not only an opportunity for a reflective evaluation of oneself but also a reason for a change which manifests itself in modifying forms of self-expression, in such way that they become legible for the receivers (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1997). Thus self-expression is an act of expressing oneself consciously, whereas expression can bear traces of unconscious verbal and motor behaviours.

It is significant that the act of self-expression require another person to be fulfilled. We need other people to give us responses about our forms and messages of expressions. It is substantial for developing a personality as well as relations with people who represent different values system, points of view and ways of being.

The results of many studies (cf. Rivers and Cowie, 2006; James and McNamee, 2004; Kilkelly and others, 2005; Czyż, 1999) show that children rights to express their opinions and thoughts freely as well as to decide for themselves are often violated. This contributes to promoting the culture of silence among children. An example of this is found in a Polish proverb: *children and fish have no voice*. The culture of silence is a consequence of violating child's right to self-expression because adults (parents, teachers, politicians) express opinions and make decisions on behalf of young people, usually not consulting them beforehand. Phil Jones and Sue Welch (2010) suggest that a full image of a *silent child* is affected by three factors: the value of a child's voice, the way of social exclusion of a *silent child*, and the dominant ways of communicating and decision-making determined by adults. The first one emphasizes that a child's voice is worth less than adult's is. Adults usually do not treat child's opinion as valuable, since they are in position of power, decision-making, responsibility. In general, children are usually excluded from using or holding power. This absence concerns not only political reality but, more importantly, school reality (Jones & Welch 2010). Teachers usually give students their voice in situations which have an insignificant impact or none at all for their school lives (Simó-Gil & others 2016). The second factor concerns means of social exclusion of people who cannot speak up or whose voices are not being heard because of features like gender, class, race or age. The third factor that dominates the image of silent child consists of dominant means of communication. In this context (...) *'voice' is seen as, something that is 'articulate' only in particular ways and that articulacy is given to a certain status: the position of the adult. Children who do not communicate like 'mature', 'articulate' adults are not seen as having a worth-while contribution to make* (Jones & Welch 2010, p. 88).

By *taking away* their *voice*, adults make children incapable of expressing themselves in a verbal and non-verbal way. Adults decide which person can speak, in what conditions and the means they can use. *Silence training* takes place not only in the family but also at school, which are two most important educational and social environments for children. It is conducive to creating enslaved units that are submissive to the authorities and which cannot defend their rights and fight for their freedom in adult lives, thus are not able to develop a relationship based on mutual respect.

On the other hand, silence plays an important role in communication and in children's lives (Blight 2011). Although, as Blight (2011) and Viruru (2001) emphasize, the concept of silence is unacknowledged in many Western societies, because these cultures privilege verbal means of communication rather than non-verbal. However, through silence people can express emotions and information. As a matter of fact, silence is a part of self-expression. This right provides people with the option of being silent when they want to be, not when they are forced to. Therefore being silent in particular situations should be the right of the child and not an obligation.

Traditionally school and home are very important places where the process of socialization and nurturing take place. In these environments special relationships between adults and children are formed. At home daughter/son – parent relationship is very straightforward. The role of young people in this situation comes down to being cared for, protected, weak and decision/rule followers. On the contrary, adults are caretakers, protectors, strong and decision/rule makers. In pupil/student – teacher relations children are considered as passive consumers, not active subjects (Jones & Welch 2010, p.91). The language used in school and in general social relation plays a significant role in sustaining this state of affairs. Gert Biesta stresses that what we call those whom we teach is crucial to shaping the relationship between teacher and youth. We usually call children 'learners' or 'students' and because of this we underestimate their ability to self-develop and be self-determined. 'Learner' is someone who lacks something. This category is constructed in terms of deficit. *The learners are 'not yet' – not yet knowledgeable, not yet skillful, not yet competent, not yet autonomous, and so on'* (Biesta 2011:32). The 'student' is someone who studies someone else's theories, explanations and uses for this purpose uses labels, ways of thinking which are taught during one's formal education. One learns which interpretations are appropriate and which are not, since they do not fit into obligatory discourses (Rancière 1991). However the most important thing in education is to give young people an opportunity to speak up, to give them a voice – their own. Therefore we should call our students – speakers. Rancière (1991, p. 65) emphasizes: *In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same.* Hence the key issue of emancipating education is based on the assumption *that all student can 'already' speak* (Biesta 2011, p.39) and their voices are as important as others.

## Methodological background

The subject matter was diagnosing the level of respecting the right to self-expression in lower secondary schools in Poland. The research issues can be expressed in the main question: What is the level of respecting the right to self-expression of lower secondary school

students? The main issue was made more detailed with the help of the following variables: record of the right in documents, knowledge of the right, understanding and acceptance of the right. **Recording the right to self-expression in documents** regulating the functioning of a school is putting the right in the provisions that organize the functioning of an institution (charter, regulations). **The knowledge of the right** is expressed by specifying it, naming a document which includes the right and the knowledge of the advocacy institution for the right by the participants of the educational environment. **Understanding the right** to self-expression is the ability to name the essence, the source and the consequences of a given right and the limitations in exercising it. **Accepting the right** to self-expression means agreeing to respect the right and using it in practice.

I conducted ethnographic research which was based on triangulation. I used: observation technique, interview, auditorium questionnaire and qualitative document analysis. All research techniques are presented in table below.

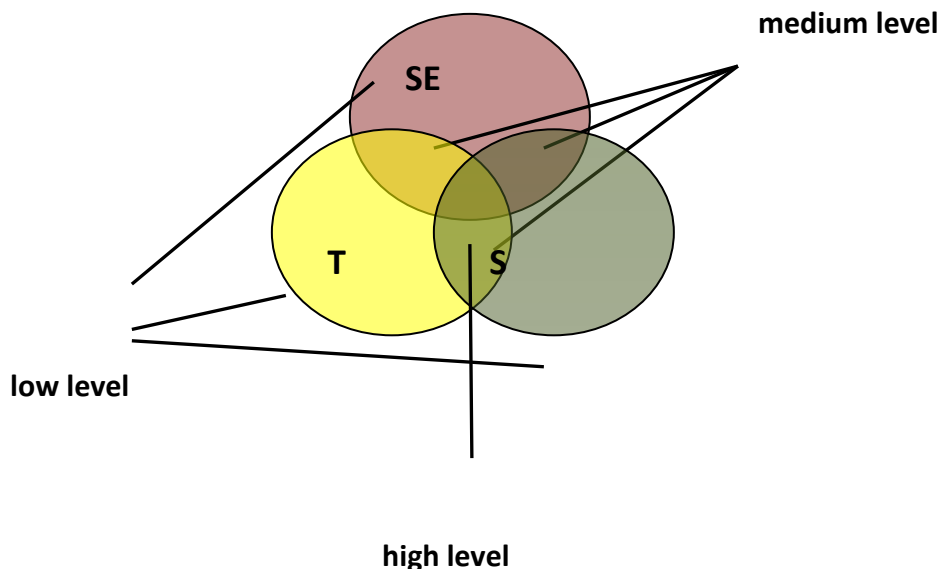
**Table 1.** Research techniques

technique	researched categories	sources of information
Qualitative <i>analysis</i> of documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• legal provision in documents regulating the functioning of school</li> </ul>	documents
Auditorium questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• knowledge of law</li> <li>• understanding of law</li> <li>• acceptance of law</li> </ul>	teachers' and students' statements
nondirective <i>interview</i> with the use of images	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding of law</li> <li>• knowledge of law</li> <li>• school environment that is or is not conducive to the respect of law</li> </ul>	students' statements and behaviors
non-standardised observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rituals of resistance</li> <li>• acceptance of law</li> </ul>	teachers' and students' statements and behaviors

The level (figure 1) of the respect of the right to self-expression could be diversified based on different school environment's<sup>1</sup> dimensions. Firstly I determined the levels of respect of this right for each element of the school environment, and then for whole school.

<sup>1</sup> I understand school environments like Florian Znaniecki (1973) did. According to this sociologist, school environment is separate social environment, which is created by the group for person who wants to be its member after preparation. It consists of people and social groups with whom this person has contact during the process of preparation.

**Figure 1.** Level of respect for law in a given middle school



T – teacher, S– student, SE – school environment

The research school was chosen intentionally. The study was conducted in two lower secondary schools (public – A and non-public – B) which, in the mission statement, refer to the values which constitute a civil society which promotes learning about human rights, learning through human rights, and learning for human rights (Howe, Corell 2010). The public school was the only school in Poland, which had patronage of the Polish government. The second was an example of grassroots initiative of parents who wanted to participate in school life. Both were not ordinary schools but educational institutions that should give children the opportunity for practice democracy and participation.

My study lasted six months and my research sample consisted of 39 teachers and 174 students from both schools. In the private school all students participated in research and in the public school I chosen two classes from each grade – six classes from school A took part in the study.

**(Un) conditional self-expression in school**

In this part, I present my main findings. Due to the length of this article, I discuss only four variables in order to present the level of respect for the right to self-expression in schools.

**Legal provision:** The right to self-expression is not specified *expressis verbis* in legal provisions. What is more, there are even provisions limiting this right. Principally restrictions concern the appearance of students, especially girls. They cannot wearing makeup, miniskirts or clothes that are too formfitting e.g. leggings. In addition, clothes should be in toned colours. Both schools have restrictions in that regard but they are very general and imprecise which lead to lead to conflict, abuse and misunderstandings-questions of interpretations of provisions. Unclear prohibitions only matter when something wrong happens in the school (e.g. when students misbehave or use drugs). Generally, teachers do not pay a lot attention to students' presences until they want to punish them - appearance is a pretext for it.

Appearance is very important for people, especially teenagers who want to find a way to express themselves. They experiment with different styles of dress, makeup and lifestyle school being a good place to implement their ideas because they receive feedback not only from adults, but what is more important, from their peers. For teenagers it is crucial to have opportunities to sample diverse lifestyle and clothing, since they create their own identities (Erikson 1980, 1970). The outfit is very important for our social image. Therefore, young people should have opportunity to experiment with their image. Of course, some boundaries should be created, especially in school, but they should be clear and the same for everyone within the school community.

Admittedly, it is very important that school documents indicate rights which are within the context of the right to express oneself freely, namely, the right to freedom of expression and to inform, which are common in the policies of student rights in both schools. However, these rights are not treated holistically. In the policies, an emphasis is put only on some aspects of these rights (which, as it can be assumed, are convenient for the teachers). This indicates a lack of understanding of their substance. One cannot respect only some student's rights, only certain relations, or only some individuals.

**Knowledge of law:** In both schools, the level of knowledge of children's rights is low. There is a problem in indicating child's rights and the resultant student rights. Both students and teachers have greater knowledge of the latter. They eagerly mention the following student rights: the right to improve grades and to report not being prepared for class. Correct denomination of the rights included in the Convention was a much greater problem. Respondents usually name the right of a child as right to life, right to freedom of speech, right to live in nonviolent environment and right to privacy. When asked about student rights, students and teachers mention mainly school documents such as school charter and regulations. On the other hand, their use of the names of the documents that *guard* children's and human rights is incorrect. What need to be emphasised is the fact that students and teachers usually do not distinguish between children's rights ( as the rights of human beings) and student rights which young people possess at school. This situation is another argument to confirm my thesis of low level of students and teachers' knowledge about children's rights. One of the best ways to explain this situation is through 'the isonomy trap'. According to Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak (2006) people who have been liberated from the oppression and

have gained their rights are able to use them in order to change themselves and/or particular elements of life. Whereas people who did not make any effort to change and to whom those rights have been given, have only these rights and do very little about them. Moreover, sometimes they are not able to deal with this 'gift'. On the one hand, they can feel oppressed by them and on the other hand, they underestimate their values and validity.

Another important issue is that both children and adults perceive rights within the context of their duties because this is the way the education process takes place. It is very common, that adults equate children's rights with their duties. Like Jones and Welch (2010, p.36) remark: *The language of rights is concerned with what an individual is entitled to have. The language of duty is concerned with what an individual should do. Rights are usually associated with responsibilities; for example, the right to privacy has an associated responsibility to respect other people's right to privacy. Duties are usually associated with a moral commitment coming from a higher authority.* The responsibility is written in the essence of both children's and human rights, because our rights as human beings are connected with the rights of others. In other words, if we have the right to self-expression, we should respect this right in another. Of course if this expression is not harmful for others or us. In addition, here arise another very important issue concerning the reality of rights – the responsibility for using ones' rights and their limitations. These problems are connected to next research variable.

**Understanding of law:** The respondents usually identify self-expression with a sincere and open expression of one's mental, physical and spiritual state. It appears that there is no necessity to pay attention to other people's need to express themselves. The possibility of expressing themselves freely is important for students. However, they do not understand the substance of this right that, by its very nature, implies the possibility of self-expression of others, regardless of whether their opinions differ.

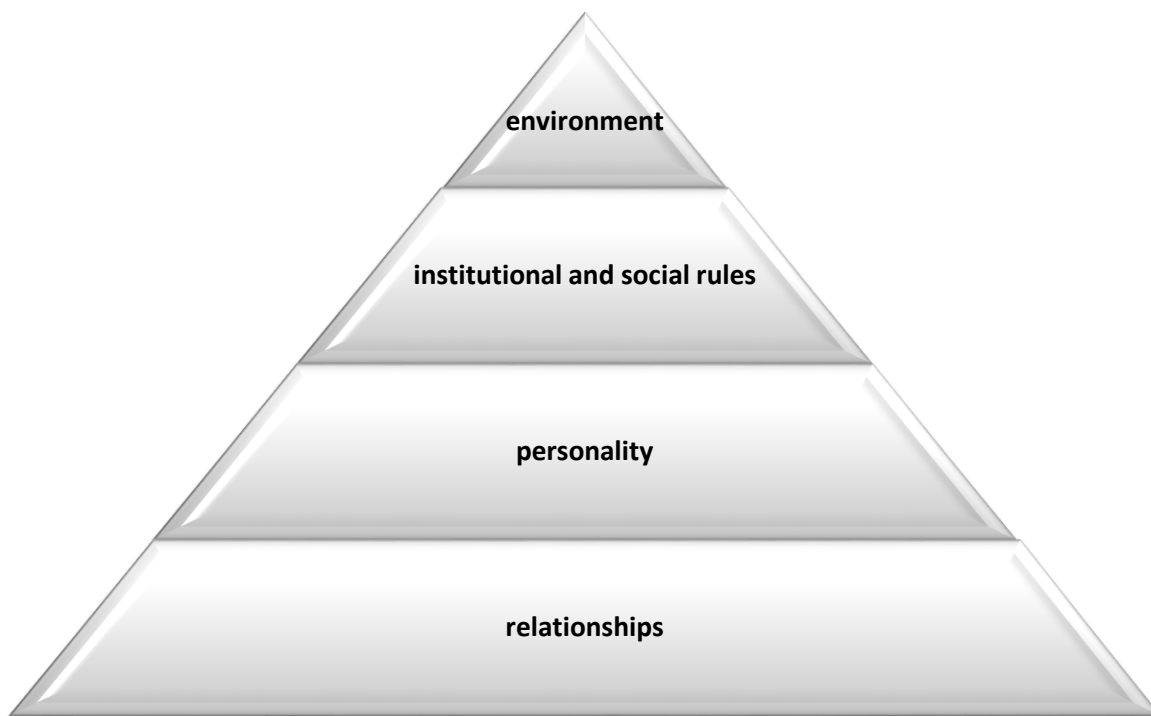
Students connect self-expression with the possibility to resist, what is very important for their development as human beings and citizens (Babicka-Wirkus, 2015), yet they misunderstand the idea of resistance and usually associate it with inappropriate behaviour or action which leads to negative consequences, not positive changes. For young people self-expression is connected with candidness and openness. One of students remarks: *Expressing oneself means that a person speaks of how he/she feel, what he/she thinks and doesn't conform yet is always true to oneself.*

The respondents point out the factors, which can limit their acts of self-expressions. The pyramid on the figure 2 presents those limitations. According to the students, their right to self-expression can be limited due to conditions in interpersonal relations: teacher-student and student-student. Young people are afraid of sanctions, which can be imposed by teachers when they do not obey school rules. On the other hand, students are mostly afraid of the lack of acceptance and derision by peers. This is not a surprise if we take into consideration the specificity of adolescence and the very important need (which is crucial for that period of life) to be part of a peer group and be accepted for the members of that group. The other factors that could restrict the right to self-expression are, in order of significance, personality, institutional/social rules and elements of school environment. In fact, none of the aforementioned factors can limit the right to self-expression. However, according to article 13 of the Convention of the Child Right, there are two situations, in which this right can be



limited: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or (b) For the protection of national security or of public order or of public health or morals.

Figure 2 The pyramid narrowing down conditions of self-expression



**Acceptance of law:** This is the most important aspect of the level of the respect of law, since it concerns the practice of particular rights in everyday situations. It is not a declarative aspect of one's attitude to children's right but the practical one. According to my research, students from school B have more opportunities to express themselves freely than students from school A. The non-public school provides students with conditions that allow them to carry out the act of self-expression, for example, by assigning special places for writing graffiti or placing students' works on school walls. In such school, students have more positive relations with their teachers who do not try to isolate themselves from their pupils. Keeping the door to the teachers' room always open is a very good example of having confidence in students and treating them as equal members of the school community. This situation is very rare in Polish school where doors to teachers' room are normally closed and to enter this space one needs to have a code.

In school A relationship between teachers and student are more formal than in school B. In public school (more often than in non-public), violations to right to self-expression take place. Due to the lack of places for students to express themselves, they destroy school benches and walls when they want to write their opinions or express their minds. These pieces of 'art' or 'self-expressions' are usually very vulgar and hurtful to people who are targeted. These situations lead to the lack of knowledge and understanding, as well as accepting to the right to self-expression. Students are not aware of the means of freedom to express their own mind and do this, describing it as 'freedom in expressing themselves', when in fact, they violate the rights of others.

## Conclusion

The right to self-expression is commonly violated in Polish school. The goal of the school is to raise polite, obedient and cultured children who will submit to the prevailing ideology without hesitation. Despite having the right to express their opinion at school, this right is treated selectively by teachers. Some teachers allow controlled expression of pupils' opinions and views, others do not permit any verbal and non-verbal acts of self-expression whatsoever. The issue of self-expression at school is similar to the issue of resistance to power (Foucault, 1990), both are acceptable to some degree, for both take part in sustaining the dominant structure and order.

To sum up I need to emphasize that, there is a low level of knowledge of children's rights in the schools that took part in the study. Naming the catalogue of children's rights and, what is more, student rights resulting from them was a problem for the students. Pupils' knowledge of the latter was better. They eagerly name the entitlements, such as the right to correcting their grades and the right to report not being ready for class. Naming the rights included in the Convention proved troublesome. When asked about student rights, they mostly name school records, such as School Charter and regulations. However, they use the names of the documents protecting human and children's rights incorrectly. It must be emphasized that the students perceive the rights in the context of duties because this is how they are trained to think.

The student level of understanding the right to self-expression was low. They associated expressing themselves with verbal and non-verbal acts of communication presenting one's views, thoughts, interests and oneself. The respondents emphasized the aspect of resistance, written into the notion of expressing oneself, as well as sincerity which should accompany these acts. However, they did not take into account the right to information that is an important element of self-expression.

In public schools, the relations between students and teachers are more formal. The act of violating students' right to self-expression, both by students themselves and their teachers, is more common. There is no assigned place for the students to express themselves, so they often carve or write their opinions concerning various issues on the walls and desks, thus vandalizing them. These forms of self-expression are usually obscene and unpleasant for people who are victimized.

It is essential to give children the opportunity to practice their rights, especially the right to self-expression. They should not only be taught about these rights but, what is more important, be educated in them. *Education is not a condition for politics and does not prepare for it, but it contains a particular experience of 'being able to' or 'potentiality' (...) that demonstrates equality* (Simons & Masschelein 2011, p.5). In my point of view, it is important to provide each child with an opportunity to speak up, rise their own voice and express themselves. Practising this skill will give young people possibility to learn how to be disobedient in situations that lead people to resist and be able to fight for their own rights. Like Rancière (2014) said, the law subject uses rights for verifying the power of the scripture, for become convinced to what a particular right really means. Therefore, school should create for the children the environment and conditions to practice self-expression and other right.

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## Acerca de la autora

**Anna Babicka-Wirkus** holds doctorate in Social Science from the University of Szczecin. She is an educator and sociologist as well. Currently she is a head of Social Concern Research Centre at Pomeranian University in Slupsk and a co-supervisor at the European Doctorate in Teacher Education program at the University of Lower Silesia. Her academic interest include children's right, school culture, critical pedagogy, educational ethnography and critical discourse analysis.