

# A transdisciplinary approach to child and youth human rights

Since its adoption in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the most widely ratified treaty in history. One of the underlying principles enshrined throughout the Convention is adult respect for children's views. This is particularly relevant in the context of the current school-based climate strikes movement ongoing throughout the world. Dr Richard Mitchell, from Brock University in Canada, argues these strikes represent an unprecedented human rights-based phenomenon, and one that emphasises millions of young women in leadership roles.



The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. Since ratified by 197 countries world-wide, the Convention's 54 articles cover every aspect of child and youth human rights - civic, political, economic, social and cultural. The treaty obliges policy makers, professionals, researchers, and governments to work together to ensure that young people are able to know and enjoy these rights wherever they live.

The treaty has provided the context for the research, teaching and publishing of childhood and youth studies educator Richard Mitchell for more than 25 years. Professor Mitchell is currently focused on the key principle of Article 12 and its interdependent relationship with health-related Article 6 (healthy development) and Article 24 (healthy clean environments). Taken together, these three Articles enshrine children's rights to have their views considered and taken seriously, according to their age and maturity, and he argues this is all the more timely given the global impact of youth-led environmental protest movements.

## YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS

It was in August 2018 that Swedish teen Greta Thunberg chose to miss school one day a week to protest outside her national Parliament. Demanding action on climate change, her one-person "Fridays for the Future" campaign has inspired young people around the world to engage in similar school-based climate strikes each week. Protests held in September 2019 attracted an estimated six million young people and took place in 4,500 locations and more than 150 countries.

Ms Thunberg had spoken previously at the United Nations telling world leaders: "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

Although perhaps best-known in media, Ms Thunberg is only one of many young women activists who have become positive forces for systemic change. Canadian Indigenous teen Autumn Peltier comes from unceded Wiikwemkoong First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Ontario and advocates for the universal right to clean drinking water. In 2016 at the age of 12, she attended a First Nations' meeting in Ottawa telling Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that she was "unhappy with the choices" he had made regarding water protection.

Like Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier has also addressed the United Nations. In 2018 she spoke at the launch of its International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development. "There are people living in third-world conditions in our first-world country," she said. "It's insane. Canada is wealthy. There shouldn't be places that can't drink their water." With startling simplicity, she added: "We can't eat money or drink oil."

## WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

Both Ms Thunberg and Ms Peltier again spoke truth to power in a youth panel session at the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland entitled "Forging a Path To a Common Future".



September 2019 climate strikes in Toronto. The event was part of the school strike for climate movement, inspired by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.



The youngest panel in the Forum's 50-year history, they appeared alongside child and women's rights activist, 18-year-old Natasha Mwansa from Zambia, and 17-year-old Salvador Gómez-Colón from Puerto Rico who campaigns to help local communities hit by natural disasters.

Ms Thunberg told the audience: "Start listening to the science and start treating the climate crisis like the crisis it is. Until we do this, we won't solve the problem." She added: "The eyes of future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you." Autumn Peltier also spoke with urgency, and while she too has received numerous awards for her campaigning, she declared: "I want to move on from protest to action. I don't want awards - I want you to help me find solutions and make change."

Salvador Gómez-Colón argued that the climate crises and natural disasters are neither political, nor socio-economic, nor racial issues: "Climate change and climate crisis just is. Until we address that fact, we won't be getting to many places." The way forward, according to Natasha Mwansa, is "partnership", and she explained: "The older generation has a lot of experience, but we have ideas, we have energy and we have solutions for the now problems and the ones that are coming up."

Dr Mitchell argues that these activists and others like them represent a powerful, new global force and that their work should be regarded as human

rights-based phenomena. He explains: "These articulate and powerful young people are acting far more intelligently, decisively and maturely than many adult authorities." He adds: "Mainstream understanding of what it means to be a child or youth appear to be inadequate

why are politicians, corporate leaders and others in authority not urgently addressing the issues they are raising?

## TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

If our societies are to overcome this failure, Dr Mitchell argues that we need

**Mainstream psychological and pedagogical understandings of what it means to be a child or youth are inadequate to understand what these young people are accomplishing.**

to understand what these young people are doing or what they are about."

Dr Mitchell believes that Ms Thunberg, Ms Peltier and their many peers also represent "a new kind of feminine consciousness" who have benefited from mobilising millions of students and supportive adults from around the globe as they "communicate through traditional and newer media portals."

And yet, as young people all over the world are calling adults out so clearly,

a new approach to solving the critical problems of our age. In particular, to help more young people to engage with the world, we need to re-evaluate our teaching, researching and professional practice by transforming our educational institutions. In particular, we should reject the prevailing western industrialised approaches in education that present 'knowledge' in siloed subjects. Instead, we should teach across subject boundaries and age limits in a transdisciplinary pedagogical framework.



Thousands of demonstrators gathered in December 2019 during the COP25 climate talks in Madrid.



Young activists like Thunberg, Peltier, Mwansa and Gómez-Colón have mobilised millions of their peers and led unprecedented demonstrations of global citizenship.

The concept of transdisciplinarity dates back to the 1970s and the work of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, French sociologist Edgar Morin and Austrian astrophysicist Erich Jantsch. This approach promotes the bringing together of knowledge and skill sets from across the disciplinary continuum to look at the world holistically and consider the connections between and across all dimensions. As Prof Mitchell explains, such “cross-pollination” helps students to learn “not only separate packets of information, but also what matters for the sake of our collective life on earth.”

Dr Mitchell identifies four recognised characteristics of transdisciplinarity. These include focusing on complex, real world problems “that locate the investigator within the investigation” and going beyond “linear Newtonian research paradigms” to the complex systems models based on Quantum science. In addition, they involve participatory action methodologies that include non-academic partners, engaged in the search “for the unity of knowledge moving beyond uni-, multi- and interdisciplinary silos.”

He also observes the frequently overlooked dimension to transdisciplinary education – Indigenous science and knowledge systems. As Autumn Peltier has shown, he believes

that we must collectively rethink what we value as knowledge in education and teach different ways of understanding the world. Mitchell explains: “These complex interconnected and interdependent knowledge systems have persisted for millennia as well as throughout the more recent, violent centuries. Adopting such approaches will further aid in our understanding of human rights and human relationships as simply one part of the natural world and are quite congruent with a century of findings from within the Quantum science literature.”

#### CONCLUSION

For Mitchell, a transdisciplinary approach that reshapes how research knowledge is produced to include young people within its co-construction and dissemination is vital if we are to resolve the complex, interconnected socio-economic, political and environmental crises our world currently faces. Young

**School-based climate strikes are an unprecedented expression of children’s rights to have their views and voices heard.**

activists like Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier, Natasha Mwansa and Salvador Gómez-Colón have mobilised millions of their peers and led unprecedented demonstrations of global citizenship. Unlike many adults, they also argue that critical problems can only be solved by thinking and working in new ways.

According to Dr Mitchell, two factors mark these young people: “They are intelligent enough in a time of unprecedented complexity and change to be listening to the right voices in terms of the science. They are also connected, thanks to internet technology and social media, in a way that humans have never been connected before.”

Their work is also a matter of child and youth human rights. Emphasising the global phenomena related to climate demonstrations, Mitchell argues: “School-based climate strikes are an unprecedented expression of children’s rights to have their views and voices not only heard but listened to and acted upon by adults in authority – in this case the right to a healthy environment now and in all future generations.”

Also according to Dr Mitchell, adults will also need humility if they are to listen closely to the views and voices of young people and see them as agents of social change. However, the UNCRC provides the mandate for that to happen and transdisciplinarity provides a new educational framework to achieve it. He concludes: “Adopting transdisciplinary complex systems approaches to facilitate local Article 12 ‘participation’ is one example of challenging the current destructive status quo.”



# Behind the Research

## Dr Richard Mitchell

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### Research Objectives

Richard Mitchell’s research focuses on international and transdisciplinary approaches to implementing the human rights of children and young people within institutional and community-based settings.

### Detail

#### Address

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#### Bio

Professor Mitchell is a graduate of the University of Victoria, British Columbia. He completed his Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Stirling, Scotland. He has taught

courses within childhood and youth studies, social work, and qualitative research. His most important role is devoted father to son Finn and daughter Siobhan.

#### Funding

The majority of Dr Mitchell’s research program has been internally funded by Brock University. Additional funding sources include Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Health Canada, and UNICEF Canada.

#### Collaborators

Each of the thousands of young people with whom I previously worked with as a front-line counselor in British Columbia youth justice, mental health, education and foster-care systems where I witnessed multiple egregious rights violations almost daily.

### References

- R.C. Mitchell (2020) ResearchPod, UK - <https://researchpod.org/behavioural-sciences/climate-change-and-childhood>
- R.C. Mitchell (2019) The Conversation - [Teaching young people what really matters](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU4Q17t4muY&t=440s)
- R.C. Mitchell (2019) [Why should we listen to child activists?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU4Q17t4muY&t=440s)



### Personal Response

#### What examples of transdisciplinary education have most impressed you?

“ The final 2020 podcast of the highly esteemed Sir Ken Robinson suggests educational reform is possible due to the unprecedented global shut-down due to covid-19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU4Q17t4muY&t=440s> ”

#### How can educators best adopt transdisciplinary approaches in their practice?

“ Contact local/global Indigenous community members and Elders to speak to students about human inter-relationships with their natural worlds and the ecosystems all future generations will depend upon. Secondly, take children into the natural world – forests, lakes, rivers, streams, deserts and mountains – as often as possible to learn about all subjects *in situ*. Finally, eliminate all forms of standardised examinations which have been shown through rigorous research to be ineffective at measuring what’s most important in education. ”