Afterword

Empowering Education for a Changing World

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This collection of manifestos and practitioner responses presents a compelling and multifaceted vision for the future of education. We hope that readers will engage critically with the ideas contained in them, adopting or adapting them to create their own visions for education, or rejecting them to clear new space for dialogue.

Our aim has been to present chapters that grapple with complex and interconnected issues, highlighting the need for a fundamental shift in how we educate children and young people in a world struggling with unprecedented social, political, environmental and technological change. What would it look like if you were to accept and explore the complexity of interconnected fields of learning? How might you exploit these interconnections to better prepare children for their future lives – both their challenges and their opportunities? We encourage educators to stop and reconsider what they do, and how and why they're doing it. If a common practice isn't working, perhaps there are alternatives that would be more effective.

Three key claims or messages flow throughout the book: (1) educational practices can and should be changed to better reflect the changing world and existential uncertainties children inhabit – regarding climate, but also mental health issues and much else; (2) we must do more to respect and empower children's voices and agency, not only to support active citizenry but to ensure educational experiences are rooted in values; and (3) there is much to be gained by forging connections across disciplinary boundaries – to think in transdisciplinary ways and suspend arguments about what used to work to consider bigger, bolder questions. Pursued together, these claims have the potential to define a powerful new narrative for education that is commensurate with the challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century.

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15.1 A World in Flux

The authors offer a sobering assessment of the world that today's children are inheriting, particularly the existential threats posed by climate change and environmental degradation. As Chapter 1 warns, there is a 'rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all'. Not only are young people increasingly aware of, and anxious about, the climate crisis but they also experience the stark inequalities underlying and being expressed by climate breakdown, despite not being responsible for them. By a similar token, over the past century, wealthy overconsumption, primarily in the Global North, has had a disproportionate impact – in climate terms – on the Global South, and particularly the poor, who have contributed least to the problem. These intergenerational and distributional injustices demand a reassessment of our values, as well as, perhaps relatedly, a review of the remit and purpose of education – geared more towards the cultivation of sustainability.

Related technological shifts, such as the transition to clean energy, and social shifts, such as increasing urbanisation, are also transforming the world and placing new demands on education. For many people, digital literacy is increasingly central to what it means to be educated. Though some chapters in this collection nod to these developments, clearly they would benefit from further exploration, and the publication of any further manifestos will centre on technology, virtual worlds and developments in digital tool and services.

15.2 Empowering Agents of Change

As noted throughout the volume, the need to empower children's voices must go beyond tokenistic consultation; beyond 'short-term initiatives' that, in failing to engage large enough numbers of children or young people, deepens marginalisation, cynicism or disaffection. Nurturing authentic pupil voices requires sustained effort, consistently applied inclusive practices and a genuine commitment to considering children's perspectives.

James visited a school in the East of England and spoke with a thirteen-year-old boy who felt that the current structure of democracy in his school was not working. He had thoughtful suggestions for how to ensure a system involving school councils and prefects does not

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become a popularity contest, and instead makes sure that aspiring leaders 'get a fair chance based on our skills and ideas, not on who can stand up and smile and crack jokes'. This serves as a reminder that democracy – either in schools or in society – is more than voting or the electoral process. In a truly democratic culture, there are multiple outlets to express one's perspectives, and different ways to be heard and to contribute to discussion.

We must let children speak in the ways they want, and we must listen in ways that enable them to be heard – only then will children develop a strong sense of self, of self-ownership, and feel empowered to act positively for themselves, their communities and their world. At the same time, education needs to support the development of oracy and dialogue skills to enable children to express views and ideas clearly and effectively. Dialogic practices also engender tolerance and a capacity to sensitively probe alternative points of view. A number of the practitioner chapters highlighted the foundational role of discourse in educational curricula.

Each chapter in this collection endorses the promise of children's agency – either by proposing ways to liberate children's voices or by describing children's rights or capacity to act. All of them, therefore, subscribe to a form of children's empowerment and, if only implicitly, a claim about children's political status. One manifesto sees this thought, asking, if we think children's voices are important – if we think they are consequential and should be listened to – shouldn't we set up political and legal frameworks that truly empower them? However, most of the chapters argue that the best way to support children's agency is through value-led education and the cultivation of practical wisdom – offering the tools necessary to make critical judgements and contribute solutions to shared problems.

This collection is committed to both the democratisation of education and the better integration (in whatever form) of children into democracy. Involving children in decision-making – either in schools or through formal political infrastructure – is no guarantee that the issues pertinent to their future, such as climate change, will be taken more seriously. Democracy is unpredictable – that's the whole point of it. However, affording children a greater role, or more rights, will likely breathe life into these processes – shifting and expanding our conversations and outlook, and possibly the tone in which decision-making (or politics) is conducted. At the very least, it will make it *harder*

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(though not impossible) for children's concerns and priorities – about climate, or how their schools are run, or anything else – to be dismissed or overlooked.

15.3 Reimagining Knowledge and Learning

A siloed disciplinary structure is at the heart of traditional educational offerings. Yet the complex, interconnected challenges facing society today clearly require a holistic, systems-based response. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the importance of transdisciplinarity is a recurring theme across these chapters. If we want education to embolden children to shape a new and better future – and not simply prepare them for a known or predicted one – we need to orchestrate broader and deeper collaborations between the sciences and arts and ensure curricula are shaped by a range of voices – including children's and families'. Many chapters emphasise the central role that schools play within communities, and several highlight opportunities to include these communities more fully in the educational process itself.

As well as breaking down disciplinary boundaries, curricula ought to broaden their horizons by addressing core human needs and concerns. As several chapters note, this might include the provision of emotional health education or time spent in philosophical exploration, helping young people to address existential questions and find meaning and purpose in their lives. The chapters also describe a wealth of creative ways to incorporate experiential learning and local issues into the curriculum, from direct engagement with nature in gardens and laboratories to learning emotional regulation through yoga poses, from computing coding of traditional knitting patterns in Norway to message boards with talking compounds such as 'Forests Are the Lungs of the World' in Uganda.

If children are to thrive in the future, education needs to foster creativity, problem-solving skills and the ability to engage in thoughtful deliberation, both individually and collectively. It must also unlock ethical considerations and explore our capacity to apply abstract principles to complex, real-world situations. These affordances cannot be bestowed by single disciplines; rather, they are the result of disciplinary collaboration.

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15.4 Looking Ahead towards a More Humane and Compassionate Future

Together, these manifestos and practitioner responses are a clarion call for more humane and compassionate approaches to education. To thrive on planet Earth, we must nurture humanity's capacity for empathy, kindness and curiosity and re-establish a mutually supportive, sustainable relationship with the natural world.

In a world increasingly dominated by digital technology, including, especially, the rise of artificial intelligence, we hope to have shown the importance of cultivating human connection, while also appreciating nature and the environmental systems upon which we depend. To do this, we need learning environments where collaboration, dialogue and social interaction are valued; in which the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate ever-expanding digital landscapes are fostered; and which understand the world, and the pedagogic disciplines used to explore it, as holistic.

Ultimately, the vision of education encapsulated in these chapters is about more than transmitting knowledge; it is about empowering individuals to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, contribute to a better world and create a future where humanity can flourish. The true impact of these ideas (and the ideas that might evolve from them) will depend on the willingness of educators, policymakers, families and communities to embrace the challenge, engage in critical dialogue and work together to transform education for the benefit of all.

Finally, though perhaps missing from the foregoing reflection and analysis, it is *essential* to remember that learning and school should be enjoyable, enriching, engaging and fun. Within and alongside the seriousness of these manifestos – and the issues at hand *are* serious – there is also the importance of play, a vital quality in children's childhood experiences. As Biddulph (2025, p. 187) explains,

> Play is not only for children. It is also for the adults who educate them. In modelling the capacity to occupy 'spaces of uncertainty', to face challenges, to consider new ways of engaging in the world, to ask bigger, better questions, to suspend what we believe to think about what might be, is to engage the social imagination. Play is for schools because schools are highly intense social places – and schools that are playful could nurture more healthy, balanced, mentally robust people who can together face the challenges of an uncertain world.

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To thrive on planet Earth, we argue that the time *is* for playfulness: in how we respond to the challenges we face and which our children and grandchildren and their grandchildren will have to solve, in the way we come together for a common good and in the ways we articulate an equitable and socially just future.

Reference

Biddulph, J. (2025) 'Play is for children not for school', in Durning, A., Baker, S. and Ramchandani, P. (eds.) *Unlocking research: empowering play in primary education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 185–187.

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