

6 Perspectives on child empowerment

This chapter presents perspectives on child empowerment from diverse authors in different countries. They were invited to contribute short opinion pieces on what child empowerment means to them, based on their respective policy, research or practice contexts. This chapter weaves a narrative of these different perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences among the diverse responses. It concludes by reiterating a common finding that is presented throughout this publication: Child empowerment requires adults to break traditional silos, and to work with a range of actors including children who should be seen as key stakeholders in these discussions. Effective policy and practice requires a multi-sectoral and multistakeholder approach.

Child empowerment: A key topic for discussion

In international research and policy spheres, discussions surrounding empowerment have skyrocketed in recent years. A simple Internet search of “child empowerment” or any of its associated terms (agency, voice etc.) will bring up a wide variety of results, ranging from research studies to academic articles, opinion pieces and blog posts, educational strategies, self-help parenting websites and more. In the early stages of preparing this publication, the editors were faced with an interesting dilemma. Despite the quantity of information on child empowerment, the quality and cohesiveness of this information varied. Very few sources provided a definition or working definition of what child empowerment means or should mean. This is a common issue with associated terms as well, such as agency. There is also a varying understanding of what child empowerment can and should look like depending on the area of research or policy under study.

It was decided that part of this publication would be dedicated to presenting a diverse range of perspectives on child empowerment, in the attempt to both find common ground and uncover differences in what child empowerment can and does mean in different research, policy and practice spheres. Presenting expert perspectives from different contexts provides a powerful learning opportunity, and having a discussion with different actors at this table, who all have an interest and have been working towards an empowered present and future for children, has inherent value. The authors invited to participate in this chapter were chosen deliberately to represent different national contexts, research backgrounds, policy contexts, and to discuss some of the more practical aspects of child empowerment in the classroom and the participation of children themselves in decision making.

The following section presents five short pieces from individuals or groups whose work seeks to empower children in different but interrelated ways. Invited experts were prompted to reflect on “What child empowerment looks like in the 21st century and what this means for modern education systems” by answering one or more of the questions in Box 6.1. Authors also had the option of bringing in new questions they thought were more important, based on the prompt and scope of the chapter.

Box 6.1. Food for thought: Questions for discussion

- What does child empowerment mean to you in your research/policy and/or national context?
- What are the main barriers to child empowerment in your research/policy and/or national context? How do you think these can be overcome or managed in the near, medium and/or long-term future?
- Mega-trends like globalisation, digitalisation, changing family structures, increasing inequalities and others are affecting the ecosystems in which children are and can become empowered agents of change. How can child empowerment be supported in times of rapid change and in light of these trends?

Navigating child empowerment: Breaking down barriers for youth participation in policy¹

Box 6.2. Irish Second Level Students' Union

The Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) is the national representative body for school students in the Republic of Ireland. The ISSU is run for students, by students. The ISSU was established in 2008, to contribute to the advancement of second-level education of all second-level students in order to improve and enrich the education of each student and to support the involvement of students at all stages of their education so that they achieve their full potential.

My name is Caitlin Faye Maniti, and I have been involved in some kind of activism since I was 8 years old. It all started when I was encouraged to provide input to create a greener campus at my primary school. Since then, I have never looked back. I have been part of numerous committees and advisory groups where significant policies were developed including anti bullying policies, state examinations adjustments for COVID-19 and even changes within the curriculum.

In 2022/23, I served as the Uachtarán (President) of the Irish Second Level Student Union (ISSU), representing second-level students in the Republic of Ireland. In this capacity, I held the ISSU seat on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Senior Cycle Redevelopment Partners forum, and many more. Currently I am a first-year undergraduate student in Maynooth University, studying Entrepreneurship. In terms of advocacy, I am a delegate on the National Youth Assembly with the Department of Children and the Shared Island Youth Forum under the Department of the Taoiseach. I am dedicated to advocating for and amplifying the voices of children and young people in decisions that impact them. Additionally, I consistently seek ways to inspire confidence in fellow youth advocates, encouraging them to recognise and utilise their capacity to contribute meaningfully. I have attained no PhDs, or master's to be in these committees and groups. My qualification and expertise come from simply being a student on the ground, and that is my unique but very important perspective.

How can we nurture child empowerment and what does that look like?

To me, child empowerment is represented by the global climate action movement, the protests against gun violence in schools in the United States of America, the Vote@16 negotiations in the European Union. Leadership in these campaigns comes primarily from children and young people, with supportive collaboration from adults. Unfortunately, in my experience, the majority of these movements only gain traction after the unaddressed issues have triggered a crisis point and there is an urgent need for change. Whether it was the anxiety and frustration of the lack of action taken surrounding climate change, or the disregard of young people's rights in Vote@16, children and young people's futures were on the line and we had to step in to ignite change as we felt nothing would have been done if we did not.

Children and young people have successfully campaigned on various issues, which has been phenomenal. On one side it is extremely inspiring and really shows the power of child voice, but on the other it is not always fostered. This needs to change.

In Ireland, there is a positive shift towards including children's voices in policy development such as through the National Youth Assembly, establishing a student participation unit within the Department of Education and other measures. Not only will these developments make policy even more inclusive of young people, they will also provide children and young people with an environment where they can gain confidence in their abilities to voice their opinions on issues that affect them. As a result of a lot of these initiatives the

attitude of children and young people participating in policy development is changing and will continue to change for the better.

The importance of one good adult

I am an ordinary student fulfilling my role as an advocate, with my expertise coming from living life as a young person in Ireland. Having that perspective at the table is extremely important for highlighting issues that might not be seen through policy or by policy makers. I worked hard to be in the position that I am in today but I give a lot of credit to a teacher I had in secondary school. She played a crucial role in encouraging me to apply for leadership roles including the roles within the ISSU and provided guidance when I came across any challenges. Every student, including myself, starts off slowly and does not necessarily understand their potential to influence and to be a leader. That teacher was my “one good adult” who sparked not only my desire to participate but she also shared opportunities with me, supporting and encouraging me along the way. I always had someone to lean on, and once I got more comfortable on my own, I then found young people who were like-minded and was then able to rely on them and vice versa. This journey into activism and advocacy can be a very isolating one, and I am so grateful to have my “one good adult” and I wouldn’t be where I am without them. I only hope that others were also lucky enough to experience the support I had.

To all the teachers reading this, never underestimate the influence you have, even if it’s as simple as sharing a workshop opportunity with a student. That could build their confidence and in turn open many doors for them to endless possibilities!

On being the only young person in the room

During my role as ISSU Uachtarán, I often found myself as the only young person in the room. Now, there are many times where a singular young person is able to fully participate but actually doing so isn’t as simple as that. Personally, I had to build up my own capacity by giving myself time to prepare for a meeting and debrief afterwards which took a lot more time and effort than if there had been more of us. This included reading the material beforehand, preparing some potential speaking points and writing down any questions I had, as well as research on some existing policies. Then the debrief would include a look back on anything I said and the answers to them, anything that any of the other members said that stuck out to me and research them, and more. Being the only young person in a room full of adults is extremely intimidating and the capacity is not built there systematically to encourage that young person to meaningfully provide input especially if there aren’t any supports given. If the facilitator is not actively encouraging the young person to provide input, it is more likely for that young person to be ignored.

If you are currently reading this and are part of a committee or advisory group with only one young person, please change this.

I was participating in a group whose sole purpose was to better encourage the voices of children and young people in policy development. I walked in for the first meeting and I was the only young person sitting at that table. The very first point I made was to introduce another young person into the group. If you are creating policy or taking decisions that affect young people, it is important to have children and young people at the centre of these conversations and to make space for them.

Moving towards an empowered future for children and young people

Using simple language

My number one recommendation is to write reports/policy papers in simple and accessible language. Otherwise providing a version of the reports/policy papers in concise and simple language could be an option. There have been too many times where we had to read and summarise 100+ page documents for

myself and other young people before a meeting. Or even to read what policies affect us in our daily lives is written in difficult language with a lot of jargon for example; abbreviations, long filler words and long paragraphs. Complex language and jargon in lengthy documents make it challenging for young people to understand. Additionally, if you are publishing a report targeting children and young people, I would also recommend adding some colour and visuals to enhance accessibility and make it appealing to read.

Avoiding decoration

One of the things I see that needs to change is improving the process of including the voices of children and young people to ensure that they can motivate a change in policy or action. There have been so many times that I have been involved in many consultations for children and young people, where we had no idea where our voice was being used or if it was lifted off the pages of the report. Ireland is very dedicated when it comes to initiatives to consulting our voices, but if it's not considered in policy actions, that is all it is; decoration. It is crucial to ensure that our voices are not just symbolic but impactful in policy or action.

Confronting manipulation

Manipulation is used when, during the consultation, adults or facilitators in the room influence the opinion of children too much, with a result that does not represent the children's genuine perspectives. Consultations should avoid undue influence from adults or facilitators, allowing genuine voices to be heard and considered in policymaking.

I have participated in many consultations and I know what the routine is. One particular consultation I was part of recently included others who were also very experienced in participating in consultations. As soon as my group was finished discussing the problems and had finalised our recommendations, we then spent the next hour phrasing the recommendations to seem more appealing to the politicians and decision makers this was made for. We did this by adding words like *economy, business, greener, European Union funding* etc. We are very much aware that our voices can be used as a tool further push a change in policy but we also knew that only if we made it relevant to an agenda our voice would have a better chance of not only heard but listened to and acted upon. Upon reflection, that was a very smart but disappointing thing I witnessed and participated in. Our voice should not need to be branded or manipulated to seem more appealing for it to be heard or taken seriously.

Shaping a shared future

In the quest for child empowerment and meaningful youth involvement in policy, my experiences underscore the need for tangible changes. While positive steps are being taken in Ireland to include children's voices in policymaking, there is room for improvement.

The impact of one good adult, often a teacher, is crucial in shaping young advocates. The challenge of being the sole young person in a room of adults calls for systematic changes to build the capacity of children and young people to contribute.

For an empowered future, simplicity in language and accessible reports is vital. Genuine youth participation should go beyond symbolic gestures by avoiding manipulation in consultations. It's a collective effort to create environments that actively integrate and amplify the voices of the younger generation, ensuring their influence in shaping our shared future.

Nurturing potential amidst adversity²

Box 6.3. María Francisca Elgueta

María Francisca Elgueta is a high school history teacher in Santiago, Chile. She was the 2022 the recipient of the Global Teacher Prize Chile and is the founder of EscuelaGlobal.org. She has worked for 12 years in high-vulnerability contexts in Santiago. These communities have a history of exclusion and limited opportunities, often characterised by poverty and marginalisation. This situation leads to a lack of access to essential services, and many children in these areas have their childhoods disrupted by child labour, drug trafficking and abuse.

Child empowerment, especially in contexts marked by vulnerability and adversity, is a multifaceted concept that transcends mere education. It signifies the cultivation of a child's innate potential, instilling in them the belief that they can achieve great things and challenging them to realise these aspirations.

My experience teaching in 2022, with schools reopening coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the transformative impact of empowering children and the urgent need for changes in our educational system.

My journey as a teacher in 2022

Throughout my 11 years working in high-vulnerability contexts, 2022 marked the first time I seriously considered leaving my profession. In my role as a history teacher, I worked in a school focused on educational re-integration, catering to students who had been systematically excluded from the mainstream education system due to years of educational backlog. Despite thinking that nothing could be more demanding than educating during quarantine, the post-pandemic scenario proved to be far more complex than I could have ever imagined.

The aftermath of the pandemic exposed the harsh reality of high-vulnerability contexts and the significant barriers they pose to child empowerment. The school environment was in absolute chaos. Distinguishing between class hours and breaks became impossible as students couldn't be effectively directed into classrooms. The prevalence of drug consumption and trafficking within the school was alarming. Criminal gangs and drug dealers were menacing the school on a weekly basis, leading to gunfire and fights at our doorstep. Teacher morale was low, and the school's leadership was overwhelmed. The situation reached a point where we spent more time dealing with the aftermath of disturbances than actually teaching. We were fearful that our students would drop out of their education, this time with no turning back.

Amid this adversity, a chance encounter with a former student provided a spark of insight. She suggested that perhaps the students' reluctance to engage was rooted in fear – fear of learning, fear of failure, fear of being seen as incapable. This revelation struck a chord, leading me to recognise a common thread in all of my years' experience working as a teacher: beneath the defiance, misbehaviour and apparent demotivation lay a profound lack of academic self-esteem.

Empowering children in such contexts demands a fundamental shift in approach. It begins with entering the classroom with unwavering belief in their potential, crafting challenging lessons that reflect high expectations, and inviting their questions to shape the learning process. Designing meaningful and relevant curriculum content is paramount to honing the skills needed for them to thrive. Furthermore, it requires the classroom to be a safe and nurturing space where students feel they can express their opinions and participate because their voice matters, they feel loved, and it's a protected space for learning.

In my effort to empower my students, I crafted a curriculum unit that bridged their life experiences with global events. Focusing on the fragility of democracy and incorporating the hate speech that was rampant

during the second World War and the Holocaust, this unit was designed to spark their critical thinking and emotional involvement. I knew that my students' personal histories - their encounters with exclusion and prejudice - could enable them to readily empathise with these historical events. The inclusion of Anne Frank's diary in graphic novel format promoted reading and fostered emotional connections. In order to encourage my students to actively participate, share their opinions, and their experiences, we collaboratively created a course agreement. This agreement, prominently displayed in the classroom, delineated the guidelines to guarantee that our classes and discussions occurred in a secure and respectful environment.

The impact was transformative. Initially hesitant, my students began to actively participate, eagerly attending classes and exploring complex historical topics. We delved into the power of the stories we tell about ourselves and others, understanding their capacity to humanise or dehumanise. We engaged in discussions about the concept of race, scrutinising it in the context of Chilean reality, prompting reflection on our own beliefs. Additionally, we explored how socio-political-economic crises trigger the quest for solutions or "miracles." We learned to analyse political propaganda and applied this knowledge to contemporary propaganda. We delved into the historical value of testimonies and contemplated how art and poetry serve as vehicles for expressing emotions and ideas that are challenging to articulate in words. Furthermore, we addressed how democracy necessitates upholding human rights to protect minorities and how hate speech can easily infiltrate society. With particular emphasis, we highlighted the value of democracy, recognising its fragility, as well as the role each of us can play in the face of injustices and our capacity to be agents of change.

The impact within the school community was impressive, with even family members seeking recommendations for further learning and students from other classes requesting copies of the graphic novel we had used. Witnessing the transformative effects of this unit on my students, numerous teachers were motivated to adopt similar approaches to promote reading and create meaningful learning experiences. The school underwent a remarkable shift, fostering a culture of learning driven by elevated expectations. This transitioned the atmosphere from one marked by violence and mere assistance, prevalent at the beginning of the year, to an environment characterised by rigorous academic standards, active learning and empowerment of teachers and students.

Overcoming barriers to child empowerment

This experience made me reflect on how children and students in socially marginalised contexts often struggle to recognise themselves as individuals with rights and responsibilities because they frequently feel unseen. It seems that all facets of society remind them of their exclusion. They lack access to adequate housing, quality healthcare, green spaces, safe environments, and the opportunity to enjoy a carefree childhood. Consequently, they grapple with a profound sense of invisibility.

Furthermore, it made me think about how, throughout history, education has been designed and delivered from positions of power, often rendering it irrelevant to students from different backgrounds. Empowering students must begin with posing open-ended questions, teaching them to rigorously select their sources of information, enabling them to construct their own questions, interpretations, and explanations of their learning. To truly empower them, we must expose them to real-world challenges, helping them develop cognitive, ethical, social, emotional and intercultural skills to construct their solutions. Empowerment entails valuing subjectivity while ensuring that interpretations are rooted in shared values. When learning is constructed in this manner, students become active participants in their own education, and the classroom takes on profound relevance in their lives.

In alignment with these principles, it is imperative that the classroom serves as a nurturing environment where students experience feelings of safety, affection and significance. Students will only be motivated and genuinely committed to challenging themselves, to embracing their fallibility, and to immersing themselves in the learning process when they are assured that the love and support extended to them is

unwavering and when the classroom offers a secure haven for the exchange of their questions, beliefs and ideas. To facilitate this, it is crucial that the school culture radiates a deep sense of respect, empathy, and affection for its students and their families, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and unique circumstances. When a student senses that they are both respected and cherished, they come to believe that they are capable of achieving anything.

This is how I learned that child empowerment is not simply about telling children they are important; it's about empowering them to lead and drive their own learning, fostering their identities, interpretations, and understandings of the world in a loving and safe space. It's about helping them realise that they can be active agents in shaping history, which, in turn, helps them feel valued and motivated to contribute to society.

Transforming education for child empowerment

To truly empower children, we must recognise that more traditional models of education, designed in the industrial era, fall short in the 21st century. Memorisation-centred learning is no longer sufficient. Additionally, curriculum rigidity can pose a barrier to the development of higher-order skills, which are essential for nurturing self-esteem in students, enabling them to build critical reflections and personal opinions. In a rapidly changing world, we must prioritise critical and creative thinking skills over rote memorisation and repetition. The curriculum must evolve to foster depth over breadth.

Additionally, school culture and classrooms need to continue changing in order to create environments where students can reach their full potential and enjoy the learning process. The strict and rigid educational systems of the past should give way to nurturing and secure places for gaining knowledge. Empowering students is only possible when they feel seen, loved and valued.

Conclusion

Child empowerment is not merely an educational concept; it is a societal imperative. It requires instilling in children the belief in their own potential, fostering their skills and abilities, and re-imagining education to prepare them to be active, informed and engaged citizens in a rapidly changing world. By empowering children, especially those in vulnerable contexts, we are not only preparing them for the future but also nurturing active and engaged citizens who can positively impact our world.

The Norwegian context and children as rights holders³

Box 6.4. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) is an expert and administrative state body tasked with implementing government policy on youth, children and families, violence and abuse in close relationships, and equality and non-discrimination. The directorate is also responsible for services relating to state-funded child welfare and family counselling services and operates care centres for unaccompanied asylum-seekers under the age of 15.

Norway performs consistently well on global children rights indexes. Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has led to several legal and institutional reforms over the years. Significantly, a provision to the Norwegian constitution states that children have the right to respect for their human value, that they have the right to be heard in matters relating to them, and that their opinion must be given importance in accordance with their age and development. Children are recognised as subjects and rights holders in legislation pertaining to early childcare and education, health, child welfare and protection, and local planning. Consequently, a child rights-based approach is increasingly recognised in Norwegian policy making and service provision. Attention is also placed on cross-sectoral approaches, particularly to address the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families, with the acknowledgement that the right to information and participation cuts across sectors and policy fields.

Children's roles in decision making have been formalised both within education and municipal planning. Student participation in school is regulated by the [Education Act](#)⁴ and includes participation in democratic processes within the school environment, including through formal bodies such as pupils' councils. But children's agency and participation are also an interdisciplinary topic within the core curriculum which stipulates that student participation must characterise the school's practice, and that students must both participate and take a share of responsibility for their learning environment. Knowledge and competence related to democracy and democratic participation have long been emphasised in Norwegian curricula and were further strengthened in the curriculum reform of 2020. Norwegian students learn about democracy and participation in several subjects. School elections are held at upper secondary schools in connection with parliamentary, municipal and county council elections with the purpose of providing students with a practical introduction to the foundations of democracy.

From 2019 and with the revision of the [Local Government Act](#)⁵, formal consultative bodies/youth councils for youth at municipal and county levels have become mandatory. National authorities also allocate funds to child and youth organisations every year with the aim of stimulating children and young people's participation and democratic practice.

Ongoing challenges

Despite a largely favourable judicial and policy environment for child rights, there are several ongoing and emerging issues that pose challenges to children and young people's agency and empowerment. This contribution will reflect on four specific challenges and propose a way forward from the Norwegian perspective.

The COVID-19 pandemic

The independent commission appointed by the Norwegian government to conduct a comprehensive review and assessment of the authorities' management of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the heavy burden borne by children and young people during the pandemic, which for many may prove long-lasting.

Strict infection control measures further exacerbated the vulnerability of children living in families with financial difficulties, families affected by drug addiction or mental illness as well as violence and neglect. Chronically ill and disabled children faced exclusion and isolation. The commission has also specifically stressed that children's right to be heard in matters that affect them was undermined during the authorities' management of the pandemic, including through the formal structures for participation mentioned above. Some of the negative effects of the pandemic might have been mitigated if children had been provided with the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns.

Increasing inequalities

The number of children growing up in low-income families is rising in Norway. In 2020, 11.7% of children in Norway lived in households with persistent low-income.⁶ Among these households, 60% had an immigrant background in 2020. Not only does this lead to inequalities in overall health and well-being, but it may also affect children's opportunities to flourish as active participants in society. Adolescents living in households with persistent low-income are more likely to experience social exclusion and loneliness and participate to a lesser extent in organised out of school activities than other children, missing out on further opportunities to engage with peers.

Discrimination

The inclusion of children with disabilities remains a challenge in the Norwegian context. This does not only pertain to equal access to rights and services, including in education. Children with disabilities may in many circumstances be excluded from out of school activities as well as formal or informal spaces for participation and community engagement.

Self-reported discrimination and hate speech against the indigenous Sámi young people and other national minorities in Norway poses a threat to their participation in public life. There is little data about hate speech against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) children, but we know that LGBTQI+ people are twice as likely to experience hate speech than the population in general. Recent data from Oslo indicates that adolescents with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual experience lower life satisfaction than those who are heterosexual. They are less optimistic about the future, lonelier, have worse relationships with school and parents, score worse on health indicators and are more often exposed to bullying and sexual abuse.

The digital environment

Children in Norway are growing up with access to a digital environment offering a multitude of opportunities for learning and civic expression. Digital spaces and social networking platforms are used to access information as well as express and advocate for issues of importance to children themselves. Yet emerging opportunities for learning and expression through the digital environment are also mediated by age, gender, socio-economic status, as well as digital skills. Children do not benefit equally from digitalisation and powerful commercial actors profit from personal data obtained through children and young people's internet use, which in turn may limit both access to information and possibilities for free speech and open dialogue. The digital environment also poses challenges for parents and caregivers in respecting children's right to privacy.

A way forward

Now more than ever, maintaining service equity in a context of increasing inequality and persistence of 'wicked' policy problems requires cross-sector collaboration and innovative partnerships. There is no one 'end all' solution; new possibilities must be continuously forged. The Norwegian government has initiated a process at the ministerial level to achieve better interaction and co-ordination between sectors in policy

development and policy implementation for vulnerable children, young people and their families. At the level of public administration, 13 agencies have joined forces to explore new ways of working to solve cross-sectoral collaboration challenges.

Young people need more digitalised access to information and services. Public sector collaboration and innovation has led to the development of health-promoting cross-sector digital interventions for young people aged 13 to 20 years on one common platform, ung.no. Through this platform young people can gain access to information and services tailored to their age and needs.

The fostering of agency and democratic practice in Norwegian schools must be accompanied by real opportunities for children and young people to have a say in the development of public policies and services. This means stimulating research and generating new data on the practice of children and young people's participation in decision making, particularly at the municipal level.

National authorities have a specific responsibility to generate and disseminate data and research on discrimination. An improved knowledge base also involves showcasing examples of good practices and local initiatives that promote children and young people's empowerment and agency.

In a world where children's lives and life chances are increasingly affected by digital technologies, public policy cannot stay behind the curve. The Norwegian government is now in the process of implementing a national strategy for safeguarding children's rights within the digital environment. This is only possible through the active participation and engagement of children and young people themselves, including through child and youth led initiatives and organisations.

Empowering children to learn through play⁷

Box 6.5. The LEGO Foundation

The LEGO Foundation is dedicated to building a future where learning through play empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Its work is about re-defining play and re-imagining learning. In collaboration with thought leaders, influencers, educators and parents the LEGO Foundation aims to equip, inspire and activate champions for play. www.learningthroughplay.com

Children are curious, creative and imaginative. They embrace discovery and wonder, and have a natural hands-on, minds-on approach to learning. These are precious qualities that must be nurtured and stimulated throughout life, and with this childlike urge to learn, they are best equipped to thrive in a fast paced and constantly changing world.

To navigate and learn in such a world, children should be empowered to become creative, engaged and lifelong learners, equipped with the curiosity, creativity and motivation to learn, which is desperately required for society and the workforce to flourish (Masterson, 2023^[1]).

Over the past decade, the science of learning has taught us that quality education, where children develop both the knowledge and the breadth of skills to apply that knowledge to real-life practices, requires pedagogies that give more choice and agency to children. At the LEGO Foundation, we define agency as children making choices and decisions to act for themselves in a self-motivated way that positively influences their own lives and the world around them.

Children develop agency through playful experiences that are actively engaging, enjoyable and meaningful to their own background and interests (Zosh et al., 2018^[2]). It is a process where children are empowered

to make choices, set goals and affect change; through play, they take ownership of their own learning by testing and trying out strategies and engaging with real-life materials in collaboration with others.

The main barrier to child empowerment is to truly recognise the potential in children's ability to learn through play. Children have immense potential as creative problem-solvers from birth, but they face systemic barriers and adult mindsets that keep them from thriving and exercising agency. When teachers are unable to exercise agency, have confidence, and knowledge to be more flexible in their pedagogical approaches, they also give children less control and fewer opportunities to exercise agency. Parents, who live under very constrained circumstances, with less opportunity and agency due to socio-economic conditions, conflict, and crisis, are also less likely to give agency to children. And when educational systems are insisting on narrow academic outcomes, such as in educational outcomes, and not embracing whole learner approaches for children to demonstrate what they are good at, they are also limiting the opportunity for school leaders and communities to give more agency and choice in education solutions.

There are five changes we need to consider for our education systems, which will empower children to be self-directed learners, equipped to address today and tomorrow's challenges, and take action to benefit themselves and their societies:

A change in mindset towards truly listening to children

Children are part of society from the day they are born. Any transformation of education needs to provide space for children's voices, and consider their perspectives by listening to, acknowledging, and acting on their thoughts and ideas. Recent research indicates that children expect education to be more experiential, joyful and practical by integrating play, and social and emotional learning (The LEGO Foundation and Tænketanken Mandag Morgen, 2021^[3]; OECD, 2021^[4]).

A change in pedagogy towards more guidance and less direct instruction

Education systems can empower children, be more effective in achieving learning outcomes, and support a broader and more holistic learning environment by integrating a broader spectrum of instructional opportunities. Traditional lecturing and instructions have served a very narrow purpose of memorising facts and principles, educators should also be supported in facilitating student learning through guidance, games and more creative opportunities to learn through playful experiences (The LEGO Foundation, n.d.^[5]; Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022^[6]).

A change in assessments to be authentic and child-driven

The traditional standardised assessments were not developed to support children's learning and holistic development. They serve a very narrow purpose, which is inadequate to grow the rich and diverse competencies of children. New types of assessments are much more integrated, portfolio-based and child-driven with self-assessments, peer-based dialogues, children demonstrating projects and engaged in playful challenges. They require adults to take the perspectives of children and give the space and opportunity to exercise agency to document, share and reflect on own experiences, while equipping them with personal examples illustrating what they are excited about and capable of (The LEGO Foundation, n.d.^[7]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.^[8]).

A change in space and materials to foster many ways to play

Our education systems have favoured one way to learn, where children are taught the same thing, at the same time, at the same place, with the same approach. Children should be empowered to express themselves through multiple materials and technologies, by supporting many ways to play and using the

rich resources and experiences from outside the classroom, in the community and with local partners (Whitebread et al., 2017^[9]; WISE, 2020^[10]).

A change in outcomes towards creativity and critical thinking

Creativity and critical thinking are among the top skills most requested by education systems and companies. These skills are developed through children's natural ways to be inquisitive, curious and learn through play. Education leaders need to fully recognise creative thinking as part of the outcomes, to adapt and integrate these as part of national reforms, and put in place the assistance needed for teachers to apply it in classrooms (OECD, 2023^[11]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.^[12]).

The LEGO Foundation aims to implement these by identifying and dismantling barriers to systemic change; to reimagine learning and catalyse partnerships to realise a positive mindset and a more meaningful purpose of education. The impact of play on education has suffered from a narrow definition focused on play activities, but where new research illustrates that the characteristics of being playful are associated with a holistic approach outcomes that also benefits education (Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022^[6]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.^[13]).

Empowering children to learn through play is more motivating, engaging and effective than traditional classroom teaching, especially for the lower age groups. In formal education, learning through play takes the form of more innovative pedagogies like project or problem-based learning, debate discussions, brainstorming, role-playing stories, field visits, hands-on and experiential activities, addressing real-life challenges and building prototypes of everyday objects. The research and examples are growing, but we need to invest in more research to fully understand what works for which children, under which circumstances.

By having children as our role models, we can make education much more meaningful, engaging and enjoyable, while nurturing the most durable skills for lifelong learning across any disciplines and subjects. If we want children not only to remember knowledge, but be curious about knowledge, capable of finding, sorting, and validating knowledge, and not least use it actively to create change, drive active citizenship, and find creative solutions in local contexts, then it is critical to create space for children's agency.

We can start by listening to children:

‘A good teacher is someone who helps you, whose lessons are fun and interesting, and if anyone gets angry, the teacher helps them to become friends again.’ EBBE, 11 (The LEGO Foundation and Tænketanken Mandag Morgen, 2021, p. 57^[3]).

Less *for*, but much more *with* youth: Realising youth empowerment through scientific research⁸

Box 6.6. Dynamics of Youth

[Dynamics of Youth](#)⁹ (DoY) is one of the four multidisciplinary themes of Utrecht University's (UU) research strategy. Harnessing the power of interdisciplinary teamwork, DoY bridges the gap between science and society to foster [a resilient younger generation](#)¹⁰, ranging from infants to young adults up to 24 years. Driven by real-world challenges, experts from a wide range of fields merge their knowledge. Spanning across all seven faculties of UU — Social and Behavioral Sciences, Humanities, Medicine, Geosciences, Veterinary Medicine, Science, and Law, Economics, and Governance — DoY embraces interdisciplinary collaborations. Our partnerships, rooted in trust and the principles of team science, connect researchers with a wide range of stakeholders to build meaningful, lasting collaborations. This multidisciplinary approach enables us to generate robust science that strengthens resilience in youth. By empowering them to become catalysts for change, we aim to increase inclusivity, reduce social inequalities, and improve youth health, well-being, and education.

Rapid societal changes such as climate change, migration, war and pandemics are profoundly affecting youth development. For some, they provide opportunities to thrive and realise their potential. For many others, however, they create barriers to social and educational resources that impede developmental opportunities across the life course and widen social inequalities. These global changes raise the stakes for improving the development, health, resilience, and well-being for all youth. As Lindy Elkins-Tanton aptly puts it, “the collective future of humankind requires that we hear all the voices at the table, not just the loudest.” (Elkins-Tanton, 2021^[14]).

This necessitates a shift in the way we think about and conduct youth research. This shift is offered by the “not for, but with” approach often used in the context of participatory design, co-design, citizen science, and community-based initiatives. The basic idea behind this approach is that for solutions to be successful, the people who will be directly affected by a solution must be part of the process of creating it. In our experience, youth are extremely insightful and eager to find creative solutions to the challenges they are confronted with. Hence, we propose that a shift from research for youth toward more research with youth offers a great opportunity to truly realise the empowerment of young people, both in current and future generations.

Traditionally, in youth research, researchers, and sometimes other experts, aim to understand and solve problems for another group of people, whom we will call *end-users*. In our case, these end-users are children, adolescents and young adults, and/or others who interact with them, such as parents, teachers or professionals. This traditional approach to research *for* end-users – in which end-users mainly have a role as passive research participants – can lead to solutions that do not (fully) meet the needs or expectations of the end-users. Even worse, in many cases, the intended solutions backfire or are not used by the end-users who need them the most. For example, government officials in Germany sought to combat childhood obesity, a major global health problem. They wanted to get third graders, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to exercise more. To avoid discrimination, they distributed vouchers for free membership in a sports club to all third graders. Not only did the program have no effect, but the children from advantaged backgrounds benefited the most. This was likely because parents and children from disadvantaged backgrounds could not afford the extra costs (e.g., equipment) (Marcus, Siedler and Ziebarth, 2022^[15]).

Research *with* end-users involves them throughout the research process, from design to dissemination, and incorporates their understanding and experience of their specific social and socio-political contexts.

End-users are not seen as passive recipients of solutions, but as active contributors with valuable insights, knowledge, and perspectives that complement those of the researchers. The approach is collaborative, democratic and iterative, with continuous feedback and adjustments. The resulting interdisciplinary teams listen to all voices, which, put simply, allows teams to paint a more complete picture of both people and their circumstances. Although end-user participation, especially with children, often requires additional time for planning, consultation, collaboration, and adapting method, research *with* end-users produces more meaningful outcomes that benefit both researchers and end-users in multiple ways.

Researchers, for example, can gain new skills, improve participation and retention rates (e.g., by adapting wording and dissemination), and get inspired for new research questions. End-users get the opportunity to exercise their right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives, and to feel heard, seen and respected (UN General Assembly, 1989^[16]). At a time when researchers are being encouraged to ensure the impact of their research, the involvement of end-users at all stages of the scientific research is particularly relevant. After all, the solutions provided by scientific insights can have a significant impact on children's lives. Preliminary evidence of the benefits of research *with* end-users can be found in research on Disaster Resilience Education (Krishna et al., 2022^[17]). In a qualitative study, children and their parents in India were involved in the development of an intervention designed to teach skills needed for future hazards. Not only did children and parents report learning the skills, but their involvement in the development and delivery of the intervention also increased their confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

End-users have a deep understanding of their own needs and contexts, which is invaluable at all stages of most research projects. In the face of rapid societal change and environmental emergencies (e.g., heat waves, wildfires, floods), science must generate more knowledge where it is needed, and only with the help of the end-users can we enable deeper understanding and faster adoption of solutions that build resilience and empower young people to act as agents of change. Their energy, determination, and willingness to challenge existing systems can bring revolutionary insights to research and society as a whole.

Involving young people and empowering them as catalysts for change is particularly important for research on vulnerable or marginalised youth. Although it typically takes more effort to reach these youth, actively involving them in research projects can be key to addressing some of the most important issues facing society today (e.g., poverty, racism, social and educational inequalities). Our team's research has shown that involving youth increases the equal inclusion of diverse voices and inclusivity (e.g., wheelchair accessible locations) and creates sustainable and equitable relationships (Nguyen et al., 2022^[18]). Crucially, the research projects *with* end-users provide concrete recommendations on how to ensure youth participation in research teams. These experiences leave little doubt that empowering end-users to influence research at all stages of the scientific process provides an additional opportunity to effectively teach, learn, and advocate for scientific solutions that improve the health and well-being of youth based on a foundation of respect and trust.

Research *with*, rather than *for*, young people and other stakeholders draws on the diverse perspectives needed to address the complex issues facing youth. Teams of researchers and end-users are formed around problems and challenges. Rather than being defined by researchers or disciplines, the teams of researchers and end-users collaboratively identify and develop the research questions, objectives and methods that address end-users' needs and concerns. At the same time, the teams ensure the use of robust science. Science that is reliable, transparent and replicable. They build meaningful relationships in which team members support each other to achieve their goals and uncover new knowledge. Progress can be accelerated because research findings and solutions to challenges are better tailored to meet the needs of end-users because they are more respectful of the cultural backgrounds, expertise, and agency of all team members. This increases the likelihood of adoption and implementation. Involving youth and other stakeholders in all stages of research not only makes our research better and more meaningful, but it also provides a unique opportunity to give youth a sense of ownership and empowerment, and to help ensure that the solutions are effective, ethical, fair and equitable.

In sum: Moving collectively towards an empowered future for all children

The preceding pages present a rich discussion with diverse perspectives, presenting often optimistic yet realistic perspectives on the realities child empowerment in policy, practice and research. Despite the diversity in voices, national contexts and backgrounds of the authors, some main themes and common threads emerged throughout the pieces of this chapter. Some of these themes can also be found woven into the discussions in other sections of this publication.

Each contribution to this chapter underscores or reiterates in some way parts of (or all of) the definition of empowerment that was proposed in Chapter 1 of this publication. Child agency and how this can be nurtured is highlighted, as is the right of children to engage in processes of constructing meaning in their lives and on acting on issues that are important to them. This comes through strongly in each of the pieces, where children are positioned as active beings who have the ability and expertise to contribute to their educational journeys, and to society more broadly. Each author or group of authors also highlights the importance of different actors, from teachers to parents to governments, in supporting children as we endeavour to reach a more empowered future. Issues such as equity, inclusion, accessibility and safety are also echoed throughout the perspectives. Points that the authors bring our attention to as well, that are crucial for child empowerment include thinking about how we can best stimulate their interest in topics that could be important or relevant to them (how can we ground children's engagement in learning or in decision making in their own lived experiences?) and how can we potentially do this in a playful, creative or child-driven way?

Child empowerment brings in unique perspectives, adding value to those of adults

The pieces in this chapter overwhelmingly support the narrative that child empowerment is something to be valued in and of itself. María Francisca Elgueta refers to empowerment of children as a social imperative, which is reiterated by Bo Stjerne Thomsen who states that children are part of society from the moment they are born, and that educational transformation should look to them for their input. Colleagues from Bufdir and from Dynamics of Youth underscore the importance of child empowerment from a human rights perspective in reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Some authors in this chapter outline the benefits children and young people can enjoy when they feel they are empowered and are in environments in which they can act in an empowered way. Child empowerment can also provide important benefits to processes in which they have been traditionally excluded, such as research and policy making. The perspectives of children are often unique, and their empowerment adds value to policy, research and even classroom settings that adults alone cannot make up for.

Caitlin Faye Maniti explains how participating in decision making at the policy level was an invaluable learning experience for her and other involved students, but also that when done appropriately and taken seriously students can impart real change on crucial decisions related to their education and their lives in general. She underscores that there are young people who want to be active participants in making decisions that affect them, and that when given the chance can effectively and passionately represent student interests.

Similarly, the Dynamics of Youth colleagues outline that experiences of research with young people suggest they are motivated, insightful and eager to participate. They underscore that certain issues, in particular those that are complex in nature, can only be understood properly by engaging end-users (in this instance, children and young people) in the research process. The Dynamics of Youth authors also highlight how having diverse voices in discussions and research processes can benefit researchers by providing inspiration and helping them to learn new skills. Bo Stjerne Thomsen highlights that children are inherently creative, curious and imaginative, and that they can be role models in thinking through ways in which education can be made more meaningful, engaging and enjoyable.

Empowerment can't happen in a vacuum: Adults are important allies

A key commonality throughout the pieces in this chapter are that child empowerment cannot happen in a vacuum. Adults are important allies for this to occur. Caitlin Faye Maniti brings up the importance of “one good adult”, or someone who acts as a mentor and inspires a young person to seize opportunities. María Francisca Elgueta echoes this by underscoring the importance of teachers and their role in providing safe, warm and inviting spaces for their students to express themselves, challenge the ways they think, and fully immerse themselves in the teaching and learning process. She alludes to the capacity of teachers to create safe and nurturing environment where students feel valued and cared for, and that teachers’ actions can and do speak louder than their words.

The Dynamics of Youth colleagues highlight the importance of narrative shifts in including young people in the research process. This narrative of how we view children and childhood has been shifting for some time, as was highlighted in Chapter 2, of children as vulnerable or seen as objects in need of protection to rights holders who also have certain social responsibilities. In the shift of research *for* to research *with* children, researchers can further move the needle on these discussions by supporting the inclusion of children and young people as researchers or active participants in research processes on topics that concern and are relevant to them.

Caitlin Faye Maniti and the Bufdir colleagues emphasise that child rights, and child participation/empowerment can be enshrined and formalised into practice and policy, which tends to be done with agreement from adults in positions of power. Caitlin described participatory processes that she and other students were involved in, often in an official capacity on decision-making bodies or committees. In some instances, there was a designated seat for one student at the table (although as she states, this is often not enough!). Colleagues from Bufdir describe instances in which child participation in decision making is required, or mechanisms in which funding is allocated specifically to initiatives led by children and young people.

In order for adults to be effective allies, they also need support. María Francisca Elgueta describes some of the barriers she encountered when teaching in a high-vulnerability context, where teachers had low morale and the school leadership was overwhelmed. While some of the details might be particular to this context, teachers around OECD countries are increasingly expected to do more, have high workloads, and tend to report high levels of stress and burnout. This underlines the importance of supporting teachers in school so that they can focus on teaching, learning and supporting their students, rather than in the case in this school where the emphasis was on disciplinary and safety measures. Providing flexibility in curricula can also be empowering for teachers to root their teaching in the experiences of the students in their classroom, as they are in the best position to do so. Bo Stjerne Thomsen advocates for support for educators in facilitating student learning through providing playful experiences and creative opportunities.

Innovation and partnerships are key ingredients for child empowerment

Innovation and flexibility

Some contributors to this chapter underline the need for challenging the status quo in traditional education systems and focusing on fostering skills such as creativity and critical thinking. For example, throughout his contribution Bo Stjerne Thomsen underscores the rigidity within many education systems that still follow very traditional models of teaching and learning. Innovating these systems and changing mindsets, pedagogies, and even the physical spaces in which we learn can be steps towards fostering student agency and in supporting skill development necessary to thrive in the 21st century. María Francisca Elgueta also calls for a transformation in education by introducing curricula that are flexible and focus on depth over breadth. She emphasises that school environments should be transformed to support nurturing and caring relationships among those in the school community. Bufdir colleagues remind us of the importance of the digital environment for children and young people. When risks are appropriately

managed, digital tools can be leveraged for child empowerment by promoting access to information, learning and civic expression.

The 21st Century Children project has long advocated for the notion of flexibility in education systems, to ensure they are fit for purpose given the changing nature of modern childhood (e.g. (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019_[19]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020_[20])). Proactive and innovative policy needs to be supported by evidence. Investing time and resources in research, and effectively mobilising the best available evidence, should be top priorities.

Breaking silos and working together

A common thread among many of the contributions was the importance of a range of stakeholders working together to achieve the goal of an empowered future for children. The authors in this chapter unanimously advocate for the active participation of children in learning processes and in decision making. Caitlin Faye Maniti highlights the importance of children and young people as stakeholders in policy making processes. Systematically ensuring that children are included in decision making, creating space for them to express their views and ideas, and ensuring that these views and ideas hold weight in the final decisions that are made is essential. Bo Stjerne Thomsen reiterates the importance of viewing children as members of society with a role to play in making decisions and acting as role models. He also highlights that parents face a number of constraints that can impact the agency their children can express.

María Francisca Elgueta underscores the important role teachers play in supporting child empowerment. She advocates for the use of pedagogical approaches that root content in children's experiences and ensuring methods empower children to be active participants in their learning process, thereby supporting the notion of children working with their teachers as active stakeholders in their learning journeys.

Buudir colleagues highlight various cross-cutting challenges to child empowerment in Norway, including discrimination, inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, and digitalisation. The remit for handling these challenges falls under various government ministries and departments, and can require co-ordination across ministries of education, youth affairs, social affairs, health and economy, among others. A joining up of government services and ministries in tackling these challenges is essential, and ensuring co-ordination across policy and judicial branches can be key in promoting child rights and empowerment. Finally, Dynamics of Youth colleagues show the importance of working together with researchers and end-users to gain new insights, to learn from one another, and to ensure science is reliable, transparent and equitable. This is done with the intent of finding solutions that are equitable, but also ethical, fair and effective.

The importance of overcoming silos and finding ways of working together across policy and research disciplines is also not a novel concept (e.g. (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019_[19]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020_[20])). However, it does seem to be easier said than done and there are serious practical considerations. These considerations bring up many questions, including: Which role do certain stakeholders need to take, and should some take a more central role? How do we effectively pool resources such as financial resources, knowledge, expertise? Child empowerment is a common goal among many different stakeholders both inside and out of education systems as evidenced even in this short discussion chapter. Governments should consider how to capitalise on the knowledge, expertise, energy and commitment to child empowerment of different stakeholders in order to ensure policy is inclusive, proactive, fit for purpose, and considers the nature of modern childhood in order to move forward together towards an empowered future for children.

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Notes

¹ This section has been authored by Caitlin Faye Maniti, 2022/23 Uachtarán (President) of the Irish Second Level Students’ Union, Ireland.

² This section has been authored by María Francisca Elgueta, History teacher and winner of the Global Teacher Prize Chile 2022, Chile.

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⁴ See: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/education-act/id213315/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁵ See: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/the-local-government-act/id2672010/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁶ In the Norwegian context households with persistently low income are defined as households that have a total income that is below 60 per cent of the median income in the population over a period of three years.

⁷ This section has been authored by Bo Stjerne Thomsen, 2020–2023 Chair of Learning through Play, The LEGO Foundation.

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⁹ See : <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/dynamics-of-youth> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁰ See : <https://doy-community.sites.uu.nl/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).



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