A manifesto to reimagine primary education in England

Anne Nicola Girvan (MA, PGCE, MEd)

Submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

School of Education, College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow

January 2026

Abstract

This philosophical exploration critiques and re-imagines primary education in England through a synthesis of post-structural, utopian and critical pedagogies. It exposes how developmentalism, chrononormativity and standardised curricula operate as regulatory discourses that normalise childhood and constrain teachers' ethical agency. Drawing on a rich lineage of educational thinkers, it reconstructs a counter-tradition of relational, time-rich and democratic education. Methodologically, the study adopts the manifesto as both form and method—combining philosophical critique with creative proposition. Its five themes—time and development, knowledge and curriculum, power and ability, space and relationality and voice and agency—trace a movement from deconstruction to renewal. The manifesto and subsequent roadmap propose a plural, inclusive and life-affirming alternative grounded in care, curiosity and collective authorship. Ultimately, the thesis contends that educational transformation requires not minor reform but an ontological reorientation.

Contents

Title page **p.1**

Abstract **p.2**

Table of contents **p.4**

Acknowledgements **p.7**

Authors declaration **p.8**

Abbreviations **p.9**

List of references **p.173**

Table of contents

Prolegomenon - A visit to a 'new school'- imaginary narrative writing **p.11**

Introduction – opening the space for reimagination **p.14**

i) Introduction

ii) Philosophical and methodological orientation

iii) Overview of the argument

iv) Conceptual architecture: the five themes

v) Thesis statement and contribution

vi) Structure of discourse

vii) Vision – in poetic form

viii) Rationale

Chapter 1 Methodology – A manifesto as method **p.29**

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Philosophical commitments

- 1.2.1 Utopian methodology
- 1.2.2 Post-structuralist methodology
- 1.2.3 Critical pedagogy methodology
- 1.2.4 Manifesto as method
- 1.2.5 Narrative, Poetics and Voice as Method

1.3 Engagement with literature

1.4 Reflections on theoretical and methodological limitations

1.5 Ethical considerations and positionality

1.6 Conclusion

Chapter 2 Theoretical foundations **p.49**

A thematic genealogy of progressive educational thought

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Time and development

- 2.2.1 Introduction
- 2.2.2 Developmentalism and age stage schooling
- 2.2.3 School readiness and the regulation of time
- 2.2.4 Development, normalisation and marginalisation

2.2.5 Alternative conceptions of time, growth and learning – reimagining time and development in education

2.2.5.1 Natural development and Enlightenment beginnings: *Rousseau*

2.2.5.2 Development meets industry: *Pestalozzi* and *Owen*

2.2.5.3 *Froebel* and the spiritualised development of the child

2.2.5.4 *Piaget* and the institutionalisation of scientific developmentalism

2.2.5.5 *Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky*

2.2.6 Conclusion

2.3 Knowledge and curriculum

2.3.1 Introduction

2.3.2 Knowledge

2.3.3 Curriculum and the National Curriculum

2.3.4 Curriculums of joy, play, wonder and hope

2.3.5 Conclusion

2.4 Power and ability

2.4.1 Introduction

2.4.2 Regimes of classification, deficit and control in assessment

2.4.3 Control and oppression in surveillance

2.4.4 Power in the unquantifiable

2.4.5 Conclusion

2.5 Space and relationality

2.5.1 Space – physical, social and emotional

2.5.1.1 Enclosure

2.5.1.2 Separation

2.5.2 Relationality

2.6 Voice and agency – how young children are positioned as learners and participants in their own education.

2.6.1 From Relational Conditions to Ethical Practice

2.6.2 Trusting Children to Lead: Equality of Intelligences

2.6.3 No Neutral Pedagogy: Presence, Accountability, Care

2.6.4 Agency as Relational and Distributed (Childist Perspectives)

2.6.5 Rights Beyond Tokenism: From ‘Pupil Voice’ to Consequence

2.7 Conclusion

Chapter 3 The manifesto - Propositions for an otherwise school **p.150**

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Poetic propositions and interruptions

3.3 Call to possibility

Chapter 4 Theoretical route to transformation and obstacles **p.156**

4.1 Introduction

4.2 International and UK examples of radical curriculum and systemic reform

4.3 Alternative models as lived experiments

4.4 Timeline for systemic educational transformation

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 5 Conclusion **p.168**

Word count (59,978)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family for your support again and again.

Thank you, Bob, for years of positive interest in my work and for not giving up on me.

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed name: Anne Nicola Girvan

Signature:

Abbreviations

AAL – Assessment as Learning

AfL – Assessment for Learning

AP – Alternative Provision

CfE – Curriculum for Excellence

COVID-19 – coronavirus disease 2019

DES – Department of Education and Science

DfE – Department for Education

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

EdD – Doctor of Education

EEF – Education Endowment Foundation

EIF – Early Intervention Foundation

ELG – Early Learning Goals

EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage

EYFSP – Early Years Foundational Stage Profile

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

ILSA – International Large Scale Assessments

IPPR – Institute for Public Policy Research

KS1/KS2 – Key Stage 1 / Key Stage 2

LEAs – Local Educational Authorities

MA – Master of Arts

MEd – Master of Education

MTC – Multiplication Tables Check

NASUWT – National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers

NC – National Curriculum

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PACEY – Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years

PGCE – Post-Graduate Certificate of Education

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

PSC – Phonics Screening Check

RAE – Relative Age Effect

RBA – Reception Baseline Assessment

SATs – Standard Assessment Tests

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disability

SPAG – Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar

TIMSS – Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

Prolegomenon

This thesis opens with a descriptive scenario that imagines a future primary school designed around radically reconfigured structures of teaching and learning. The prolegomenon adopts a narrative mode to present this conceptual possibility in a tangible form. Rather than beginning with abstract theorisation, I use storytelling (Sword, 2009c) to illustrate the assumptions and values underpinning a mixed-age model of primary education. This stylistic choice enables the reader to envisage the preferred future that the subsequent chapters examine analytically and critically.

The scenario follows a fictional group of visitors who tour a prototype mixed-age primary classroom. Presented in the past tense and third person, the narrative records their observations and the teachers' explanations. Direct and reported speech is used to convey the voices of the teachers, whose comments cite real research sources. Their responses are crafted to reflect both established scholarship and my own interpretation of it. In this way, the prolegomenon functions as an orienting device: it introduces the themes and principles that the thesis later interrogates more rigorously.

The Scenario

A group of journalists, parents, children, head teachers and other interested visitors assemble outside Class 1. After receiving their visitor passes, they are welcomed into a large, open-plan classroom by the Forest School teacher. The visitors note sand trays, a puppet theatre, reading and writing areas, maths and measurement stations, and a range of musical 'invitation-to-play' instruments. Storage is accessible and neatly organised. The teacher explains that the school places a premium on children's independence and care for the environment, echoing the respect for materials observed in Montessori settings (Cossentino, 2006).

The topic teacher introduces herself and responds to questions about knowledge and curriculum. She explains that the school rejects discrete subject boundaries in favour of integrated, inquiry-driven project work. Multiple projects run concurrently, and children contribute to shared endeavours by naming or tagging their work.

She describes weekly whole-class stimulus sessions involving Philosophy with Children picture books, aligning her practice with Haynes and Murris' (2017) argument that 'age-based

categorisation is misguided, unnecessary, limiting and counterproductive' (p. 971), and that loosening such boundaries may enrich education 'in all kinds of unexpected ways' (p. 971). She also draws on 'emotionally nuanced storytelling' (Goldmark, 2021) through short films such as *Piper* (Barillaro, 2016) and on artistic or musical presentations. These approaches resonate with aspects of Waldorf Steiner pedagogy, including the use of narrative to introduce mathematical concepts, exemplified in Edwards' (2002) account of presenting arithmetic through dramatised stories (p. 5).

Teachers and pupils initiate projects based on these shared stimuli, producing project books, artworks, compositions or presentations to which all may contribute. As the topic teacher prepares materials, three further teachers enter.

The phonics teacher emphasises 'the crucial role for phonics and spelling', along with literacy and numeracy more broadly. She notes that the removal of age-related expectations enables each child to progress 'at their own time and at their own pace'.

The topic teacher explains the role of 'show me' and 'tell me' cards placed throughout the classroom to foster independent inquiry. Drawing on concepts described by Percival (2020), she notes that the facts and statements on these cards increase in complexity without reference to age-stage models. Some cards are created by children, some collaboratively with teachers, and some by educational suppliers.

The literacy teacher adds that digital technologies—including tablets, computers, mobile devices and virtual reality—support inquiry, writing and experiential learning. She reflects on her dissatisfaction with annual class changes in the old system and her interest in continuity models. Research into Montessori and Waldorf Steiner schools, where children remain with the same teacher for three years, convinced her of the value of sustained relationships (e.g. Edinburgh Steiner School, 2026). The prospect of teaching the same cohort for six years offers the possibility of deep family partnerships and co-constructed learning.

The maths teacher builds on this discussion, citing DeLuca and Hughes (2014) on collaborative teaching in Waldorf schools. She describes following Bert van Oers' principles for promoting mathematical thinking—play format, productive dialogue, schematising, narrative competence and intertextuality (Poland & van Oers, 2007; Dijk, van Oers & Terwel, 2004; Palmér et al., 2024). Measurement, data handling, time, shape and space emerge 'organically' through

projects. She illustrates her approach to teaching time: surrounding children with clocks to stimulate inquiry ‘but not to make them beholden to it’, thereby avoiding the constraints of rigid timetabled lessons.

The Forest School lead introduces her role, explaining that children can access the outdoor learning environment throughout the day. She supports projects undertaken in nature and connects her work with research within the Common Worlds framework.

A visitor asks how assessment operates in this system. The Forest School teacher responds that assessment is never age-linked. Rejecting high-stakes testing, she asserts that only formative assessment should inform next steps. Teachers identify where each child is on their phonics, literacy, numeracy, emotional, social and independence pathways to determine appropriate progression.

A final question asked by a visitor concerned financial viability. One teacher notes that the mixed-age model became feasible only after a new government in 2024 increased funding for Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development. Universities and colleges revised their training programmes, and teachers disillusioned with the old system pursued new research-informed pathways. As non-fee-paying mixed-age schools such as The New School, London emerged, parents increasingly opted for alternative provision. Funding structures shifted accordingly, and resources previously allocated to intervention, assessment and prescribed curriculum materials were repurposed, enabling the development of a sustainable new educational model.

Introduction – opening the space for reimagination

i) Introduction

ii) Philosophical and methodological orientation

iii) Overview of the argument

iv) Conceptual architecture: the five themes

v) Thesis statement and contribution

vi) Structure of discourse

vii) Vision – in poetic form

viii) Rationale

i) Introduction

Education is in crisis (Arendt, 1954; UNESCO, 2014; Benn, The Guardian, 2018; Hayes (UK Parliament's Education Committee, 2024). In England the system stands at a threshold as the Labour Government's review led by Professor Becky Francis approaches its recommendations. While many nations have pursued imaginative structural change, England remains tethered to a statutory settlement designed in 2014 and subsequently expanded. After decades of reform anchored in measurement performativity and developmental orthodoxy the primary phase faces a crisis of purpose (Galton, 2021). Accountability regimes narrow curriculum while hierarchies of ability and readiness persist. COVID-19 exposed the fragility of these arrangements, the inequalities they sustain (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021) and amplified them (Hoskins & Wainwright, 2023). Decolonial feminist and Indigenous movements have reinvigorated debates about what education is for. It is within this unsettled terrain that this thesis intervenes arguing that structures claiming to nurture development and equity too often normalise exclusion and constrain the conditions through which learning community and justice might flourish.

This work is philosophical rather than empirical. It asks what it would mean to reimagine education as a relational ethical and ecological practice rather than a mechanism of governance and production. Critique alone is insufficient. If unjust structures are to be dismantled we must also offer visions of what could be otherwise. Throughout the thesis creative techniques such as the prolegomenon and the closing vision are used to unsettle habitual frames (Hanna & Ashby, 2022). This storytelling is a methodological move designed to disrupt prevailing perspectives and to invite readers to discern alternative futures for education. These methodological decisions will be deeply considered in Chapter 1.

The thesis argues that mainstream primary education in England is governed by interlocking regimes of time, knowledge, classification, space and voice. Developmental chronologies naturalise 'readiness' while curricular hierarchies authorise some knowledges and marginalise others. Assessment and labelling practices sort children through deficit logics while school architectures and routines discipline bodies and relationships. Participation frameworks often tokenise voice rather than redistributing agency. Chapter 2 develops this diagnosis through a thematic genealogy drawing on progressive traditions and critical scholarship while remaining alert to exclusions and co-options. From that critique the manifesto is offered as a methodological hinge linking analysis to ethical construction so that reimagining education becomes a disciplined task rather than an abstract hope.

The thesis enters a context of intensifying disquiet in educational debates. A growing international literature signals a paradigmatic shift in how learning is conceptualised (Lillard, 2023; Immordino-Yang et al., 2024). Immordino-Yang et al. (2024) argue that educators are tasked with correcting behavioural crises, mental health needs and academic pressures through piecemeal solutions. Post-pandemic debates have similarly framed this moment as an opportunity to reimagine schooling (Mowat & Beck, 2023). Many press for public conversations about what education is for while cautioning that the task is both daunting and urgent (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Heissel et al., 2019). Hyman (2020) insists that a return to pre-pandemic 'normal' is insufficient given toxic pressures, high-stakes logics and the crowding out of creativity.

> Inside we know a simple truth: 'normal' was not right. Normal for schools had become unbalanced, at times unhinged. Tunnel vision. A pressure that was unhealthy, often toxic; Ofsted inspections, high-stakes exams, the crowding out of creativity.

It is important that the changes we now make in education are radical. They need to consider the 'relationships between all the key players in learning: students, teachers, technologies, school cultures, curricula and assessments' (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014, p. 1). Too many fads and educational trends have emerged and made little difference overall (Mezies, Yates & Huband-Thompson, 2023; Armstrong & Armstrong, 2021). Superficial change has been evident in schools over recent history, but some educational futurists propose that the current system needs urgent attention (Gilbert, 2017) and that the level of radical change required is ignored by most (Sardar, 2010).

Alternative providers show that schooling can be organised otherwise and that purpose can be rethought at the edges of the system. Inayatullah (2005) argues that to disturb prevailing discourses, we must listen at the margins and attend to unheard voices. Networks such as *Alternatives in Education* echo this orientation and insist that communities must ask what education is for, and how children learn best, rather than waiting for government solutions. Their stance aligns with this thesis which treats marginal practices as conceptual resources for redesigning the mainstream rather than as niche exceptions. 'The world is undergoing revolutionary changes. We need a revolution in education too' (Robinson, 2015, p. 2).

Across diverse educational contexts in England and the wider United Kingdom, such as Forest Schools, democratic schools, small rural schools, Special Schools and Alternative Provision, there exists a reservoir of practices that challenge the assumptions embedded in mainstream English primary schooling. These settings work with children whom the current system

frequently marginalises, yet they often succeed where conventional approaches do not. They offer more flexibility to meet children's needs (Goodall, 2019). Their effectiveness lies not in a single method but in shared philosophical commitments: relational pedagogies, flexible and mixed-age structures, experiential and outdoor learning, and forms of curriculum co-construction that honour agency, belonging and community (Almond, 2020). Research from Forest School education (Murray & O'Brien, 2005; Waite et al., 2016), mixed-age teaching (Veenman, 1995; Penafiel & Tomas, 2015; Berry, 2018), rural schooling (Hargreaves, 2017), Alternative Provision (Taylor, 2012; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014) and divergent-thinking pedagogies (Whitebread et al., 2017) demonstrates that such models can cultivate engagement, confidence and flourishing in ways rarely achieved within standardised, age-segmented environments. Boyd (2020) shows that mixed-age classrooms encourage depth rather than pace (Robbins, 2024), support revisiting concepts over time and normalise different rates of learning. Cronin (2019), who albeit it critically and cautiously, identifies that social and relational benefits are consistently reported. Rather than offering prescriptive models for replication, these examples operate as conceptual resources, attesting to the possibility of organising education otherwise and to the existence of more humane and expansive structures already taking shape at the margins. Cronin (2019) argues that mixed-age grouping in primary schools should be understood as a structural arrangement rather than a pedagogy, finding no consistent evidence of negative attainment effects and showing that difficulties typically arise from misalignment with age-normed curricula, assessment, and accountability frameworks.

Education manifestos have repeatedly been written across history, suggesting a persistent dissatisfaction with prevailing educational arrangements. Biesta (2024) notes that pragmatic manifestos are criticised, and idealist and utopian manifestos are criticised. This manifesto attempts to straddle the divide between pragmatics and idealism. This manifesto situates itself within a long and at times controversial history of progressive education which it draws on critically. The often wildly disparate writings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Owen, Montessori, Dewey, Malaguzzi and others are explored. The work of these philosophers and educators has challenged pre-existing models of schooling, and together offer alternative visions rooted in what some argue as freedom, experiential learning and child-centred practices. The critique levelled against each of these diverse traditions and historical figures is also examined and used positively in the argument built in Chapter 2. Some of their ideas have been co-opted or diluted; others remain marginalised within dominant discourses. But each thinker or alternative education system has opened up important questions about the nature, purpose and ethics of education – questions that have never been more urgent than in the current conjuncture.

Interest in decolonial and Indigenous perspectives that challenge Eurocentric assumptions about learning, knowledge and development continues to deepen and grow. Scholars such as Andreotti and de Souza (2012) call for an *education otherwise*—one that disrupts colonial logics of control, extraction and certainty and instead embraces uncertainty, humility and relational accountability. The work of Yunkaporta foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems and *kinship thinking* offering a cosmology of education where flourishing is reciprocal, ecological and non-anthropocentric (Yunkaporta, 2019, 2023).

Debates surrounding the nature, purpose and ethics of education are long-standing, complex and often contested—taking place across academic, professional and policy spheres (Marshall, 2017). This work seeks to contribute meaningfully to those conversations by advancing discussions leading to a vision of education oriented toward human and ecological flourishing. While *flourishing* itself is a polysemic and evolving term shaped by shifting philosophical, cultural and political contexts (Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025), it is used here as a guiding ideal for reimagining education as a deeply relational, life-affirming and ethical practice. *Flourishing* and other contentious and multivalent words used in this thesis are defined in relation to literature in Chapter 1, section 1.3. Key terms such as child, teacher, community, Bildung, agency, autonomy, relationality are defined in section 1.3, following a brief overview of the English National Curriculum for readers not fully immersed in the policies and practice.

As we discuss briefly in Chapter 2 and further develop in Chapter 4, other countries strive towards change, but England maintains and is beholden to a statutory curriculum designed in 2014 with various add-ons. Chapter 4, conscious of international consideration, proposes a phased ten-year transformation designed to avoid the fragility of earlier progressive 'moments' by embedding change through professional formation assessment redesign community partnership and legislative protection. This is a document of hope. It is written in the belief that something better is not only imaginable, but already alive – in the quiet refusals of teachers who prioritise kindness over grades; in the laughter of mixed-age Forest School groups; in the curiosity sparked by a child's question. It draws from the voices often pushed to the margins.

The thesis is a manifesto for change. It highlights major criticisms of the current primary education system in England and offers preferrable and better futures for schools and for education through a critical engagement with the philosophical and historical lineages of progressive education. Ideas from the past, while often visionary and transformative, cannot

of course be adopted uncritically; rather, these ideas are positioned as interlocutors in an ongoing dialogue about what education could become. The argument developed throughout the thesis foregrounds some inherited insights of progressivism, while also interrogating their limitations. This serves to show that the thesis seeks not to return to a nostalgic or idealised past, but to reanimate and repurpose progressive legacies in the service of a future-oriented, emancipatory vision of primary education. This vision departs from contemporary policy orthodoxy and reclaims education as a space of possibility.

ii) Philosophical and methodological orientation

The philosophical and methodological orientations of this piece are introduced here and are further explored and developed in Chapter 1, section 1.2. In developing this manifesto, we draw on elements of synergy between utopian thinking, post-structuralism and critical pedagogy to create a comprehensive critique of the current education system and to propose transformative alternatives. Utopian thinking offers a bold vision of what education could become—a future not constrained by the limitations of existing structures, but one that embraces the possibility of radical change.

This then serves as a motivational force, challenging the status quo and inspiring us to envision more just, inclusive and dynamic educational environments. Coupled with post-structuralism, this approach questions the dominant ideologies and power dynamics embedded within education. Post-structuralism encourages us to deconstruct normative educational practices, revealing how systems of knowledge and authority have been constructed to maintain and conceal particular social orders. It emphasises the fluidity of truth and the importance of multiple perspectives, which aligns with the manifesto's goal of creating an educational system that is adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of children, teachers and communities. At the same time, critical pedagogy offers a praxis-oriented framework that challenges oppressive structures and advocates for the agency of both students and educators. By integrating critical pedagogy's focus on empowerment, dialogue and social justice, this manifesto advocates for education that is not merely a reproduction of existing inequalities, but a transformative practice aimed at fostering critical, independent thinkers who are engaged in social change. Together, these intellectual traditions provide both the theoretical critique and the practical impetus for reimagining an education system that prioritises flourishing, democracy and equity over compliance and standardisation.

The thesis steadfastly refuses to adopt a single framework. Instead, it draws from a constellation of thinkers - not ultimately to synthesise or totalise, but to provoke and to unsettle. This refusal is not a methodological deficiency but a deliberate epistemological stance. It mirrors the political and ethical commitments of the thesis: to difference, to the unfinished and to the possibility of becoming otherwise. A radical shift in education must begin with a clear critique of the existing system, exposing how it reproduces social hierarchies, suppresses critical consciousness and prioritises compliance over genuine learning. The adopted utopian, post-structural and critical pedagogy methodologies and the manifesto style of writing are intentional, philosophical and political choices made in order that a more humanising, emancipatory image of education can be fully envisioned.

The thesis draws from the rich—if often marginalised—tradition of child-centred and progressive pedagogies. Thinkers who, in their different ways, imagined education as the cultivation of human potential through care, experience and moral relation rather than control. Their insistence that learning should engage the head, heart and hands continues to reverberate through later reform movements. Some translated these ideals into practice—foregrounding the environment as a 'third teacher', the arts as forms of knowing and the child as a competent, co-constructive being. From the twentieth century onward, some reconceived education as the reconstruction of experience toward democratic life, and demonstrated the inherently social nature of learning, collapsing the false divide between individual and community (Derry, 2013). Noddings' ethics of care, Biesta's emphasis on subjectification and Greene's claim for imagination as the ground of emancipation each extend this humanist lineage, urging that education must engage the becoming of persons, not merely the production of outcomes. hooks' call for education as 'the practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994, p. 12) provides a pedagogical ethic of dialogue, presence and transformation elaborated in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 develops a thematic genealogy of progressive educational thought, tracing how ideas of childhood, development, knowledge and schooling have been constructed historically and how they continue to shape contemporary practice.

iii) Overview of the argument

The argument that unfolds in this thesis moves from critique to reconstruction, and from deconstruction to design. It begins by interrogating the philosophical, political and temporal structures that underpin English primary education, particularly its emphasis on measurement, developmental benchmarking and standardisation. It shows how these mechanisms regulate not

only practice but possibility. Drawing on post-structural, utopian and critical pedagogical perspectives, the thesis contends that these arrangements are historically contingent rather than inevitable, and therefore open to transformation.

Chapter 2 is the conceptual and argumentative core of the thesis. It undertakes the theoretical labour required to ground the manifesto, examining the historical and philosophical roots of current educational structures and demonstrating why transformation is necessary. From this diagnosis, the argument turns to reconstruction. Through a critical reading of educational thinkers, the thesis retrieves a lineage of progressive and relational pedagogies that have sought to educate the whole child in community, care and imagination. These traditions are not treated nostalgically but reinterpreted through contemporary theoretical frames to expose both their promise and their limitations.

Building on this theoretical groundwork, the thesis develops a conceptual architecture organised around five interlocking themes. Each theme illuminates how schooling disciplines and marginalises, while also offering conceptual openings for renewal. Together they structure both the critical diagnosis of the current system and the constructive proposals of the manifesto in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 translates these themes into a Manifesto for Educational Transformation and a ten-year roadmap for systemic change, drawing on international exemplars and alternative educational practices. The thesis concludes, Chapter 5, by considering the critiques such a radical reorientation will invite, positioning dialogue, contestation and reflexivity as essential to any emancipatory educational project.

iv) Conceptual architecture: the five themes

The conceptual framework of the thesis is structured through five interdependent themes: development and time, knowledge and curriculum, power and ability, space and relationality, and voice and agency. Each theme functions as a lens through which to examine how education disciplines and excludes, and how it might instead enable flourishing. The five themes structure Chapter 2, where they are developed through a sustained reading of progressive educational traditions to show how the current system emerged and how alternative logics might be reclaimed. Together, they form an interlocking architecture for reimagining educational possibility.

Development and time

Educational systems in England remain governed by a linear, age-based temporality that defines children through developmental norms and chronological expectations. These temporal structures operate as technologies of control—segmenting learning, measuring progress and naturalising inequality. This theme draws on genealogies of developmental thought from Rousseau to Piaget and counter-traditions such as Montessori, Vygotsky, Reggio Emilia and democratic schooling to reveal how alternative temporalities—slow learning, cyclical rhythms, flexible pacing—offer more inclusive and humane possibilities. Time is reconceptualised not as a neutral resource to be managed, but as an ethical and relational dimension of education.

Knowledge and curriculum

What counts as knowledge—and whose knowledge counts—remains a central political question. This theme critiques the dominance of monocultural, disciplinary curricula that privilege abstract, measurable content over lived experience, cultural plurality and ecological awareness. Building on decolonial and critical pedagogies, it examines how epistemic hierarchies sustain exclusion and marginalisation. In contrast, historical recommendations from Froebel and Dewey and commitments to inquiry-led, project-based and place-based approaches frame knowledge as co-constructed, contextual and dynamic. Curriculum thus becomes a site of encounter and negotiation rather than transmission—a living practice shaped by imagination, community and environment.

Power and ability

Educational discourse constructs difference through notions of ability, normality and success, often reproducing structural inequalities. This theme investigates how these categories are maintained through assessment regimes, behaviour policies and institutional hierarchies. In dialogue with critical disability studies, childist philosophy and feminist pedagogy, it redefines ability as relational and distributed rather than fixed or measurable. Drawing on examples from Special Schools, Alternative Provision and inclusive practice, the theme envisions an education system organised around dignity, adaptability and interdependence, where power operates through shared capacity and collaborative responsibility.

Space and relationality

Learning is always situated—materially, socially and ecologically. This theme explores how school architectures, timetables and spatial hierarchies shape belonging and agency.

Traditional classroom layouts—rows, corridors, containment—reproduce disciplinary logics of surveillance and separation. By contrast, models such as Forest Schools, Reggio Emilia environments and community-embedded small schools demonstrate how spatial openness and sensory richness foster connection, autonomy and wonder. Here, space is understood not as a backdrop but as a participant in pedagogy—a relational medium through which learning becomes embodied, creative and connected. Relationality, a key feature of a reimagined education essentially links children to the more than human world, their peers, their families, their communities.

Voice and agency

The final theme centres on the ethical and political imperative to recognise children as active subjects in their own education. It analyses how discourses of participation often tokenise 'voice' without redistributing power. Through the work of Freire, hooks, Rancière and childist scholars, agency is redefined as relational, emergent and shared. Genuine educational transformation requires that children are not only heard, but are also trusted to question, lead and co-create. Agency thus becomes both a pedagogical practice and a democratic principle, essential to schools as spaces of dialogue, care and shared responsibility.

These five themes are mutually constitutive: developmental time, assessment and space shapes curriculum; power relations influence whose knowledge and whose voices are valued; spatial design mediates voice, belonging and control. The framework therefore functions not as a static taxonomy but as a living ecology of ideas. Within and between these interwoven domains, the manifesto's proposals for educational transformation are conceived.

v) Thesis statement and contribution

The thesis argues that the English primary education system is governed by temporal, epistemic and political structures that regulate, normalise and marginalise the child. Through linear developmentalism, standardised curricula and performative regimes of accountability, schooling privileges conformity over curiosity and control over care. In response, the thesis proposes a radical reimagining of education grounded in post-structural, utopian and critical pedagogical traditions. It contends that education must move from regulation to relation—from systems that measure learning to practices that nurture flourishing.

The argument unfolds through the interdependent themes. Together, they trace how the structures of schooling shape subjectivity and how they might be reconfigured to support ethical, inclusive and democratic forms of learning. Through the genealogical and philosophical analysis of educational thought the thesis situates contemporary debates within a long history of both radical vision and exclusion. Drawing on decolonial, feminist and ecological perspectives, it reconstructs these traditions to articulate an education that is plural, dialogic and justice oriented.

Methodologically, the work adopts the manifesto as a hybrid philosophical form—at once critical, speculative and practical. It contributes to contemporary educational discourse not by offering a prescriptive reform agenda, but by proposing a philosophical architecture for transformation: a call to design educational systems that honour difference, reciprocity and co-authorship. In doing so, the thesis expands the field's theoretical and ethical vocabulary for imagining education otherwise.

The central question the thesis seeks to answer is: **can we reimagine mainstream primary education in England as an ethical, relational and life-affirming practice, rather than a system of measurement and control?**

vi) Structure of discourse

Chapter 1 introduces the methodological and conceptual framework, including the manifesto as method.

Chapter 2 provides a thematic genealogy, structured historically and conceptually which provides the argumentative backbone. It is the key chapter which critiques, synthesises, lays the conceptual foundations and constructs the argument. The depth of the critique includes developmental psychology, the National Curriculum in England, assessment regimes, classroom architecture and constructions of the child. Chapter 2 builds the argument for why the manifesto propositions are both justified and necessary.

Chapter 3 articulates the manifesto's proposals and reimagines the structures of schooling.

Chapter 4 considers how transformation might be implemented

Chapter 5 synthesises the argument, invites debate and offers concluding reflections.

vii) Vision

The vision of this inquiry into education is to argue for a reimagined radical school model that embraces inclusive, mixed-age, interest-led, child-centred, indoor, outdoor and project-based

learning-- with no standard assessments or compulsory curriculum grounded in community and creativity, ethical and relational responsibility.

The school is not a building,
not walls that close,
not halls that echo with bell and command.
It is a field of possibility,
an expanse that spills across time and space,
where learning is fluid,
and knowing is a river, not a shore.

There are no rigid desks,
no rows of seated minds.
Instead, the earth is part of the lesson,
trees grow beside chalkboards,
stones become the tools of inquiry,
wind whispers ideas,
and the sky holds questions.

In this place, age is not a boundary,
but a spectrum of experience,
where the youngest teach the oldest,
and the oldest learn from the new.
No age-based line divides them—
they are threads in the same woven cloth,
each bringing wisdom,
each offering wonder.

The walls do not exist in the same way.
The space moves with the children,
not controlled by clocks or tests,
but shaped by need,
by inquiry, by play.
There are no isolated classrooms
but pockets of engagement—

a workshop under a tree,
a story circle by the river,
a philosophy discussion in the garden.

Teachers are not sages from afar,
but companions, facilitators—
they walk beside, not in front,
listening, guiding,
reflecting, questioning.
They do not hold the answers,
but they foster the questions
and help each child become
the thinker they already are.

Curriculum is not a script to follow,
but a co-created dance,
where interests bloom in spontaneous joy,
and knowledge grows as it is needed,
not forced to fit a predetermined shape.
It is in the mess of art,
the depth of drama,
the rhythm of music,
the challenge of solving real-world problems.

The walls may have no edges,
but the community has roots—
it grows with the land,
with the people,
with the world outside,
connected by threads of possibility.

The children are not passive,
not subjects to be measured or fixed.
They are active agents,
explorers,

dreamers,
doers,
who write their own stories,
who shape their own learning.

Here, there is no hurry,
no race,
no competition.
Time stretches,
it pauses,
it bends to the rhythm of curiosity,
and is freed from the tyranny of the clock.

This is a school that remembers—
it remembers that learning is about becoming.
It remembers that we are all always in the midst of learning,
in the midst of growing,
in the midst of creating.

And this school is open—
to the world, to the earth,
to the sky, to each other,
where every voice matters,
where every story is honoured,
where every child can be,
can become.

vii) Rationale

The rationale for the thesis is to contribute to the development of education at a time of crisis (Aldridge, 2020; Biesta, 2020). My approach is to consider the role of education and put forward preferred futures for schools and education. Following Allen and Goddard (2017), I regard the philosophy of education as a potential form of insurgent critique; one that is not committed to the mere improvement of distinct areas within the current education system but to a broader and more radical 'bootstrapping' of education. This means looking to the theories and

pedagogies of social movements and the struggles of victims of injustice. Many philosophies and theories of education have sought to improve the system. Much work critiques the current system, but the complete renewal of a new system remains under-theorised.

As a practitioner, my elaboration of the manifesto seeks to illuminate practices, processes and philosophical commitments that might reconfigure primary schooling. This is a call to reimagine primary education in England. Central to this reimagining, through philosophical consideration and grounded in practice, is the recognition that relationality, and the voices and agencies of children, parents, teachers and communities, have been persistently under-represented. Restoring these to the heart of education is both an ethical and a political imperative.

Failure to transform education is not merely an issue of pedagogy—it is an issue of justice, democracy and human rights. Schools that silence children's voices, regiment their time and limit their creativity are not neutral institutions; they are sites of systemic oppression (Freire, 1972; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). If education is to serve human flourishing, it must be reclaimed as a radical, liberatory practice. As Freire (1972, p. 34) argued there is 'no such thing as a neutral educational process'. Friere's assertion and rejection of education as neutral is revisited in each theme in Chapter 2 as the term 'education' is broken into constituent parts. The argument is not simply repeated but is built up throughout the chapter revealing the many elements of non-neutrality within the system. To remain complicit in a broken system is to choose oppression. To reimagine education as a space of autonomy, play, inquiry and justice is to choose freedom.

The time for passive acceptance is over. The future of education belongs to those who dare to create it.

Chapter 1 Methodology – A manifesto as method

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Philosophical commitments

1.2.1 Utopian methodology

1.2.2 Post-structuralist methodology

1.2.3 Critical pedagogy methodology

1.2.4 Manifesto as method

1.2.5 Narrative, Poetics and Voice as Method

1.3 Context, definitions and conceptual clarifications

1.3.1 The National Curriculum in England

1.3.2 Conceptual definitions

1.4 Engagement with literature

1.5 Ethical considerations and positionality

1.6 Conclusion

Chapter 1 Methodology – A manifesto as method

1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodological frameworks that underpin the work undertaken here. Given the crisis of purpose and imagination outlined in the introduction, a conventional empirical methodology would be insufficient. The philosophical, critical and utopian methods adopted here respond directly to the systemic conditions. It does not claim neutrality or objectivity in the traditional investigative sense. Rather, it embraces a methodological stance that is unapologetically critical, imaginative and transformative. The thesis is hence a philosophical intervention—a manifesto—which seeks not only to critique but to reimagine the possibilities of education. The chosen method, therefore, aligns with the intention of the work: to challenge the normative assumptions of mainstream schooling and to propose alternative, radical futures.

In this chapter, we first outline the philosophical commitments that inform the work. We describe and justify the manifesto as both form and method and explain how this methodological approach is entangled with post-structuralism, critical pedagogy and utopian thinking elaborated in 1.2.1 – 1.2.3. Following this, we discuss the significance of voice, positionality and narrative within this synthetic form and reflect on both its limitations and its potential. We then follow this section with an explanation of how we engage with the literature in the thesis.

1.2 Philosophical Commitments

Following on from the philosophical and methodological orientation set out in the introduction, this section intends not to repeat but further develop the philosophical commitments of the thesis.

Philosophical inquiry in education, as Ruitenberg (2009) notes has a complex relationship with traditional or mainstream methodologies. Philosophy of education tends to transcend conventional empirical approaches. In the present work, we argue that there is considerable value in articulating a methodological stance, especially when the research seeks to engage with political and educational debates that have practical and conceptual relevance and implications.

The research elaborated here is rooted in reflection on the real consequences of education, particularly for those excluded or marginalised by current systems. A key decision during the development of the work was whether the research should take an empirical or philosophical approach. While empirical methods could provide data on pupils who are failed by the current system, I believe such an approach would risk merely critiquing the system without attempting to transform it or to offer alternatives for the future. Data points would limit the discussion too narrowly and welcomed instead the opportunity to think and write more broadly, in a more analytical, reflective style but future focused.

Adopting a philosophical 'methodology of inquiry' is not a rejection of 'method' per se, but rather a challenge to the notion that research objects must be strictly defined by pre-determined methodological assumptions. In line with Biesta (2010b), we maintain that educational research must remain open to the protean unpredictability and subjectivity of its objects of study. As part of the conceptual and philosophical grounding of this study, we draw on the enduring influence of key historical figures in the tradition of what is broadly known as 'Progressive Education'. In engaging with these foundational figures, there is no attempt to replicate their frameworks wholesale. They are grounded in distinct philosophical traditions (Oladele & Jumali, 2025). Rather, we treat their contributions as philosophical resources — points of departure for critical engagement and speculative rearticulation in light of current social, political and ecological conditions. This historical dialogue enriches the manifesto's conceptual development and underscores its situatedness within a longer tradition of educational resistance and renewal.

1.2.1 Utopian Methodology

In the position taken in this work, we adopt utopianism not as a closed vision of a perfect society, but as a methodological stance—a critical and imaginative way of thinking that enables new possibilities to emerge. Utopian methodology, as Levitas (2013) insists, is not about building blueprints for ideal societies, but about a 'method for exploring the potential for change' (p. xv). It is both a critique of the present and an imaginative act of construction. In a world where the future of education is too often imagined only through the lens of marketisation, accountability and efficiency, utopian thinking offers a radical act of refusal and proposition.

Resonant with Levitas' framing of utopia to 'think differently, systematically, and concretely about possible futures' (Levitas, 2017, p. 7) the task to expand our collective capacity to want differently is taken up. In the context of this analysis, that means cultivating the desire for an education system rooted not in performativity or control, but in joy, care and human flourishing. Utopian methodology, used throughout my reading, then, helps resist what Fisher (2009) calls *capitalist realism*—the pervasive sense that 'there is no alternative' to the status quo (p. 2). This work insists that education is something we can reimagine, reshape and re-story with wider social and cultural ramifications.

This orientation is not about escapism or abstraction. Rather, as Levitas (2013), Facer (2021) and Webb (2025) each argue, utopian thought is deeply political. It is a method of drawing out what is missing from the present; of seeing education not just as it is, but as it could be. Utopian methodology requires that we name the injustices that are systematised into schooling structures and also that we make space for speculative thinking that is generative and grounded in possibility.

The thesis does not aim to offer *the* categorical answer for how education should change. Instead, it offers a vision—provocative, imperfect, speculative, possible—of how things might be otherwise. Considerations are made so that we can avoid the perils of this becoming more stressful than what it replaces. The school I imagine, the children I listen to and the teacher I position myself as are all part of a single utopian project: one that seeks to restore imagination, justice and community to the heart of education. Facer (2021) urges educators and researchers to move beyond crisis narratives and towards *radical hope* and *public dreaming*. Noteboom and Ross (2024) suggest that post digital and speculative methodologies are essential in confronting the uncertainty and complexity of our times. In an age marked by environmental collapse, socio-political fragmentation and educational exhaustion, the call to imagine alternatives becomes not just a creative act, but an ethical imperative. This methodology enables research to move through critique and into construction. Through it, we offer not just an account of what is wrong with education, but a contribution to how it might be different.

While utopian thinking provided the inspiration for what could be, post-structuralism offered the tools to explore how the dominant educational structures and discourses have been historically constructed, maintained and legitimised. Grappling with post-structuralism has thus allowed me to interrogate critically the ways in which power, knowledge and identity are woven into educational practices, while also offering space to imagine how these forces can be disrupted and reconfigured. Throughout this process, I found elements of critical pedagogy

informing my work. Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on dialogue, emancipation and challenging oppressive power structures, became an almost unconscious companion in my exploration. It was a reminder that, while post-structuralism critiques the systems that constrain us, there is also a call for active resistance, transformation and praxis—ideas central to the work of Freire and other critical educators. This theoretical intersection between post-structuralism and critical pedagogy reinforced the notion that education is not just an intellectual exercise but a deeply political one, where theory and practice must intertwine in the pursuit of liberation.

It is through this dynamic interplay of post-structuralism and critical pedagogy that I have been able to craft critique elaborated here—one that not only envisions a radically different future for education but also seeks to deconstruct the deeply embedded narratives that limit its potential. In the following section, I will outline how post-structuralist methodology serves as a cornerstone of this work, offering both a critical lens and a methodological tool for rethinking education from the ground up. And, in the subsequent exploration of critical pedagogy, I will show how its principles of dialogue, resistance and transformation informed my thinking, offering a crucial companion to the post-structuralist critique. Critical literacy and critical pedagogy empower subjects by engaging them in the co-production of knowledge about their own contexts and circumstances.

1.2.2 Post-structural methodology: critique as method, argument as event

Building directly upon the utopian methodology outlined above, post-structuralism provides the analytic means through which the thesis interrogates the assumptions that structure mainstream primary education in England. Whereas utopianism opens imaginative space for alternative futures, post-structuralism offers a method for unsettling the very categories, binaries and norms that render the present natural or inevitable. This methodological stance enables the thesis to treat educational concepts—such as age, ability, progress, development, curriculum knowledge and teacher authority—not as neutral descriptors but as discursive productions. Following Foucault (1977), I approach these categories genealogically, asking how they emerged, whose interests they serve and how they function to regulate the possibilities available to both children and teachers. This approach underpins the critique of age-based cohorts, readiness narratives and behaviourist logics, demonstrating that these structures operate as technologies of governance rather than empirical necessities.

Derridean deconstruction likewise informs the analysis of binary oppositions—such as child/adult, teacher/learner, normal/special, success/failure—that organise educational practice. These binaries stabilise particular distributions of authority and legitimacy, shaping curricular expectations, assessment regimes and everyday classroom relations (Biesta, 2013; Ruitenberg, 2015). By unsettling them, the methodology opens space for alternative understandings of learning, identity and relationality that are not predetermined by these inherited oppositions.

Post-structuralism also shapes the *form* of the research. The manifesto sections employ speculative, relational and open modes of writing that resist closure and invite interpretive plurality. Argument is presented not as a linear accumulation of truths but as an event—an unfolding that holds critique and creation in productive tension. This stylistic choice reflects the thesis's ethical commitment to contingency, multiplicity and the unfinished.

In concrete terms, post-structuralism guides the thesis in questioning education through a historical examination of developmental time; exposing the ideological foundations of ability hierarchies; challenging epistemic authority within the 'knowledge-rich curriculum'; interrogating spatial logics of enclosure; and re-reading teacher authority as discursively constructed rather than inherently given (Bingham, 2008). In this way, post-structuralism provides the methodological foundation for the diagnostic task of the thesis: to reveal how education regulates possibility and how dominant narratives may be disrupted to make space for genuinely alternative educational futures.

1.2.3 Critical-pedagogical methodology: dialogue, justice and transformation

If post-structuralism furnishes the theoretical tools for critique, critical pedagogy provides the methodological orientation for reconstruction. It operationalises the utopian impulse by grounding speculative imagining in commitments to justice, dialogic practice and collective transformation.

Within this thesis, critical pedagogy functions first as a methodological commitment to dialogue. Drawing on Freire and hooks, knowledge production is approached as collaborative rather than transmissive, and this orientation shapes both the tone and structure of the manifesto. Propositions are offered not as prescriptive instructions but as invitations to

conversation, reflecting the belief that educational vision must be constructed with—and not merely for—children, teachers and communities.

Critical pedagogy also informs the thesis' analysis of power. It provides a means of examining how schooling constructs and legitimises unequal relations, whether through behaviour policies that criminalise children, assessment systems that stratify ability (Hallam et al., 2003) or curriculum structures that silence particular knowledges. This methodological stance does not confine itself to critique; it also legitimises the proposal of alternatives. The vision articulated in the manifesto—including mixed-age learning, co-created curricula, the repositioning of teachers as facilitators, and the expansion of child agency—derives directly from critical pedagogy's insistence that education should be a site of empowerment rather than domestication.

Finally, critical pedagogy frames the thesis as *praxis*. The movement from diagnosis in Chapter 2 to proposition in Chapter 3 and the elaboration of a roadmap in Chapter 4 reflects the Freirean demand that reflection be joined to action. Critical pedagogy therefore provides the methodological justification for the transition from critique to construction, ensuring that its speculative reimagining remains accountable to the lived realities of educational communities and to the demands of justice.

Together, post-structuralism and critical pedagogy form a methodological constellation that complements the utopian method described above. While post-structuralism destabilises the dominant logics of schooling, critical pedagogy orients the thesis toward the democratic, dialogic and transformative possibilities that emerge once those logics are unsettled. In this interplay, the thesis finds a methodological stance capable not only of critiquing what education has become but also of imagining and articulating what it might yet be.

1.2.4 The manifesto as method

Using manifesto-style writing as a method of research allows me to position this writing not only as an academic inquiry, but as a call to action. Marx and Engels' (1969) spirit of transformation is what fuels the manifesto. I am not merely observing the system of education from a distance; I am speaking from within it and writing towards something better. Manifesto writing is increasingly being recognised in academic contexts, with universities offering it as a legitimate mode of assessment and intellectual exploration (Sword, 2009a, b, c; Fahs, 2019a,

b, c; Hanna & Ashby, 2022; Muir & Solli, 2022; Tack, 2022). As a teacher, a mother and someone deeply embedded in the everyday realities of primary education, I see manifesto writing as a powerful tool for both reflection and provocation.

This manifesto approach is characterised by three key features. First, it departs from, or enlarges, the empirical conventions of the social sciences. While I value evidence and data, the study undertaken in these pages is philosophical and exploratory in nature. It does not seek to quantify, but to question—deeply, critically and creatively. My aim is not to offer metrics or outcomes, but to offer vision and to open up new conceptual possibilities. Secondly, manifesto writing allows me to imagine otherwise—to disrupt the taken-for-granted structures of primary education and propose a future that is not yet fully realised but entirely possible. The criticisms of the current system of education act as impetus for the propositions of alternative and better ways. Thirdly this is a political project. Following Freire's insistence that education is not neutral, I write with the same belief. It either supports the status quo or challenges it. I want this work to take a stand. Informed by thinkers like Freire (1972), Giroux (2011) and Mouffe (2009), I see my writing as a confrontation with power—a way of refusing what currently exists and proposing something more just, more inclusive and more humanising. As Mouffe (2009) argues, democratic life depends on the articulation of contesting political visions (pp. 104-110). This thesis, as manifesto, is my contribution to that contestation.

By writing in this form, I embrace a mode that is unapologetically transformative, affirmative, personal and polemical. It allows me to speak both as a researcher and as a practitioner, as someone inside the system who refuses to accept its inevitability. It is a method of dreaming and of dissent. It invites others to imagine alongside me and—perhaps most importantly—it insists that change is not only necessary, but possible.

In the next section we set out some of the features of manifesto writing adopted in this work.

1.2.5 Narrative, Poetics and Voice as Method

The methodological commitments outlined in Sections 1.2.1–1.2.4 — utopian imagination, post-structural critique, critical pedagogy and the manifesto form — establish the philosophical ground upon which the research stands. Narrative, poetics and creative voice function here as the methodological expression of those commitments. They enact the work of unsettling dominant epistemologies, redistributing authority and inviting alternative futures into view.

The narrative prolegomenon imagined classroom vignettes, the poetic vision and the manifesto itself are therefore not stylistic additions but integral methodological devices that allow the thesis to perform its central commitments: to question, to deconstruct, to reimagine (Haraway, 2016) and to transform.

The use of narrative in this thesis is a deliberate methodological choice. These creative forms are not supplementary to the argument; they function as tools for inquiry that enact the conceptual commitments of the five themes developed across the thesis. The prolegomenon, the imagined classroom scenes woven throughout the text, the poetic vision in the Introduction and the manifesto itself all operate methodologically by making visible forms of educational possibility that conventional academic discourse may struggle to articulate. The prolegomenon, for example, disrupts the dominant chronologies of schooling — its clocks, deadlines and sequences — by slowing and bending narrative time. This enactment mirrors the critique developed under development and time, showing rather than merely describing how learning unfolds when freed from linear developmental expectations. The imagined classroom vignettes serve as methodological interventions into knowledge and curriculum. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, alternative forms of representation challenge what counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it. In presenting learning as co-constructed, relational and interest-driven, these scenes model the curricular alternatives the thesis argues for. They resist the authoritative monologue of the *knowledge-rich* classroom and instead demonstrate, in narrative form, what decentralised, inquiry-led knowledge production can look like when we *write otherwise* (Braidotti, 2019; Keet, 2015).

The poetic vision in the Introduction similarly materialises the theme of space and relationality. By dissolving the boundaries of the school building, depicting learning under trees, beside rivers and within community spaces, the poem enacts the spatial reimaginings that the manifesto proposes. Here, form and content converge: the writing itself becomes a more permeable, expansive educational space. Questions of power and ability are addressed through the shifting narrative voice and the inclusion of children's imagined perspectives. These textual strategies redistribute authority within the writing, unsettling academic hierarchies by granting epistemic space to voices typically marginalised in educational discourse (Ahmed, 2017). The creative form therefore performs the critique it advances, showing how ability norms and power relations might be reconfigured. Finally, the manifesto's polyvocal style and dialogic invitations embody the principle of voice and agency. Rather than asserting a singular authorial stance, the manifesto welcomes the reader into co-imagination and critique. This methodological

stance mirrors the educational practices it advocates agency emerges through participation, dialogue and the refusal of closure.

Across these examples, narrative and poetics operate as methodological devices that enable the argument to be felt as well as understood. They provide an epistemic shift — from telling to showing (Sword, 2009c), from analysis to enactment — and thereby align form with the wider commitments to justice, imagination and transformation of the thesis. The creative components are thus integral to the research design: they model alternative educational futures. They perform conceptual critique and invite the reader into the work of reimagining education – being undone and reformed by the process of inquiry (Lather, 2007).

1.3 Context, Definitions and Conceptual Clarifications

This section, referenced in the introduction, is not extensive but will provide greater clarity for the reader. Educational discourse is dense with terms that carry multiple, contested meanings. Concepts such as *child*, *teacher*, *agency* or even *education* are often treated as if their meanings were self-evident, when in fact they are shaped by historical, political and cultural forces. Because this thesis undertakes a philosophical reimagining of primary education—and proposes a manifesto that intentionally unsettles dominant assumptions—it is necessary to clarify how key terms are used in this inquiry. These definitions are stipulative rather than universal**:** they are constructed for the purposes of this argument and evolve across the thesis as concepts are deconstructed, reinterpreted and reassembled. First, we add context to the thesis for readers not immersed in the English system of education by providing a brief contextual frame of the National Curriculum which will hopefully introduce it before it is critiqued in full in Chapter 2.

1.3.1 The National Curriculum in England: A Contextual Frame

The **National Curriculum** provides the statutory foundation for what is taught in English primary schools. It structures learning through four Key Stages, beginning with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), in which children aged birth to five are assessed against seventeen Early Learning Goals. From Year 1 onward, curriculum content becomes subject-based, with statutory assessments punctuating children's schooling through the Phonics Screening Check, the Multiplication Tables Check and the Standard Assessment Tests at ages seven and eleven.

Originally designed to ensure a 'broad and balanced education' (DES, 1988), the curriculum has increasingly become intertwined with a culture of accountability, comparability and performativity (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009). Boyle and Bragg (2006) claim that it was constructed without a clear philosophical, pedagogical or epistemological rationale and that it lacks internal coherence. Its age-stage structure embeds particular assumptions about development, cognition and ability. It assumes that learning is linear, that children of the same age should be able to do similar things and that progress can be captured through standardised metrics. Over time, due to episodic and reactive curriculum reform (Boyle & Bragg, 2006), this has contributed to a narrowing of curriculum breadth, heightened pressure on teachers and pupils and a reduction of autonomy for both (Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023; Eastman, Kearney & Dyer 2011).

This context is not peripheral but essential. The manifesto that follows begins from the conviction that many of the system's most pressing problems—inequity, standardisation, demotivation, exclusion—are structural rather than incidental. Reimagining education therefore requires reimagining the conceptual foundations on which such structures rest. The definitions provided below serve as conceptual anchors for this work of reconstruction.

1.3.2 Conceptual Definitions

Child

In this thesis, the child is understood as a *capable, curious and relational subject*—not a passive recipient of knowledge, not an incomplete adult-in-waiting and not a node on a developmental chart. This conceptualisation aligns with progressive, sociocultural and post-structural traditions that view children as meaning-makers embedded within social, material and ecological networks. The child appears throughout the thesis as an *autonomous learner*, a co-creator of knowledge and a participant whose agency is realised not in isolation but through relationship, dialogue and encounter.

At the heart of this manifesto lies a radical reimagining of *the child in education*—not as a passive recipient of knowledge, but as an autonomous learner and co-creator of meaning within a dynamic educational community. Rooted in traditions of progressive education, this vision aligns with Montessori's and Holt's (1976) insistence on 'inner drive, spontaneous activity', 'intrinsic motivation' and the natural curiosity of the learner as central to meaningful

education. In these spaces, learning is not individualistic but interdependent, occurring within mixed-age communities where knowledge is co-constructed through peer mentoring and collective inquiry, echoing the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (1990). Inspired by Dewey's (1938) and Neill's (1960) principles of purpose-driven, experiential learning, children in such environments can be invited to follow self-directed projects that reflect their own questions and passions, rather than external curricula or assessments. Learning can extend beyond the classroom into natural environments, affirming ecological and embodied knowledge through Forest School models and nature-based pedagogies (Knight, 2013; Louv, 2005a). Freed from rigid timetables and prescribed outcomes, the child can engage with learning at their own pace, fostering sustained attention and flow (Gray, 2013). This conceptualisation of the child foregrounds their agency, competence and epistemic authority, challenging dominant paradigms of schooling that too often marginalise their voices and experiences.

Teacher

The teacher is conceptualised as a *co-learner, facilitator and ethical guide*, rather than the authoritative dispenser of knowledge imagined by traditional policy discourses. Drawing on traditions including Freirean pedagogy, Reggio Emilia practice and relational ethics, this definition emphasises attentiveness, responsiveness and collaborative inquiry. The teacher constructs learning environments—physical, emotional and conceptual—that support curiosity, agency and democratic participation (Macy et al., 2025; McNally & Slutsky, 2016; Alijabreen, 2020; McIrerney, 2009; Hickey & Riddle, 2023; Riddle & Hickey, 2023).

In parallel with a reconceptualisation of the child as an autonomous, active and capable learner, this manifesto also redefines the role of *the teacher* within a radically progressive educational paradigm. No longer cast as the authoritarian dispenser of knowledge, the teacher becomes a facilitator, co-learner and guide—an attuned and responsive presence in the learning process. Drawing on the pedagogical philosophy of Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia approach, teachers in this model act as curators of rich, multi-modal environments, intentionally designed to provoke inquiry rather than deliver fixed content. Their practice is grounded in observation and deep listening, functioning not as transmitters of knowledge but as researchers of learning, responsive to the evolving questions and needs of children (Rinaldi, 2006). Within this framework, the teacher's interventions are minimal yet meaningful: scaffolding is offered in line with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, supporting learning without pre-empting discovery. Crucially, teachers model democratic participation by co-constructing meaning

alongside learners, embracing uncertainty, improvisation and intellectual humility in the manner of Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1972). In this reimagined landscape, the teacher does not orchestrate learning from above but walks beside the child, bearing witness to their cognitive and emotional unfolding. The teacher becomes not the architect of education, but its ethical companion.

Community

If the child is the autonomous learner and the teacher a co-learner and guide, then *the community* becomes the extended classroom—the living, breathing ecology in which education is embedded. In a radically reimagined model of schooling, learning is no longer confined within the school walls but becomes interwoven with the local, cultural and intergenerational lifeworld that surrounds the child. Drawing on traditions of community-based and democratic education (Dewey, 2004; hooks, 1994), this vision positions the school as a porous space—both metaphorically and literally—where relationships with families, local artisans, storytellers, elders, activists and cultural institutions are not peripheral but central to the curriculum. Learning becomes situated, dialogic and reciprocal: the community does not simply 'support' the school, it co-authors the learning experience. Such a model challenges neoliberal framings of education as a private good, repositioning it as an ethical project (Fielding & Moss, 2011). The school becomes a node within a wider civic ecology, where knowledge is produced through collaboration, care and participation across generations. In doing so, it reclaims education as a fundamentally social and political act—grounded in context, oriented towards justice and rooted in the everyday life of the child within their community.

Community refers not only to the immediate school environment, but to the broader network of families, peers, local organisations and ecological contexts that shape children's experiences. Education is framed here as a *collective endeavour* and a shared ethical responsibility, expanding beyond institutional boundaries toward a more interdependent vision of learning.

Education

Education is conceived as a relational, ethical and imaginative process of becoming—far wider than instruction or schooling. It encompasses the cultivation of attention, curiosity, connection and responsibility. In this thesis, education is not measured through attainment or compliance but through its capacity to support flourishing, agency and relational wellbeing.

Progressive

The term progressive signals a commitment to openness, plurality and democratic participation. While it draws on historical movements, philosophical considerations such as those inspired by Dewey, it is used here as a future-oriented disposition rather than a nostalgic reference. Progressive education is framed as an ongoing project that interrogates inherited norms and seeks more equitable and life-affirming alternatives.

Child-Centred

Child-centredness is a historically constructed concept, whose meaning has shifted across time, disciplines, and policy contexts (Chung & Walsh, 2000). Policy documents deliberately use the term ambiguously and it risks becoming a rhetorical label rather than a precise concept. Child-centred education is taken to mean *responsive rather than permissive*. It respects children's interests, rhythms and questions, and recognises them as epistemic agents (Chung & Walsh, 2000). Here, child-centredness is conceptualised as a relational ethic grounded in listening and co-construction. It is not as an idealisation or romanticisation of childhood. As argued by Nicholas, Rouse & Paatsch (2021) it recognises children as active agents. It is not laissez-faire, but a demanding pedagogy that requires careful observation, intentional planning and ethical responsiveness. It is a means of supporting equity and inclusion.

Radical

Radical (from *radix*, root) denotes an approach oriented toward structural transformation rather than incremental reform. It asks what assumptions must be destabilised for education to become more just, more relational and more attuned to human and ecological flourishing. Radical here implies depth, not extremity: a willingness to rethink education at its foundations.

Flourishing

Flourishing is employed as a relational and ecological, ethical and temporal concept. It draws on neo-Aristotelian and capabilities-based accounts (Nussbaum, 2011) to describe the conditions under which individuals and communities can thrive. Flourishing exceeds wellbeing or happiness; it emphasises interdependence, agency and the freedom to live meaningfully with others. Flourishing must be understood as a virtue-ethical achievement and that education’s distinctive contribution lies in the cultivation of moral judgement and character rather than wellbeing alone (Carr, 2021). Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2025) argue that education has a legitimate but bounded role in promoting human flourishing, understood as the cultivation of

capacities for agency, virtue, meaning and relationship, rather than the direct production or measurement of well-being outcomes.

Bildung

Bildung is used to signify a process of ethical and cultural formation. While traditionally framed as an individual process, in this thesis it is reinterpreted as *collective Bildung*: co-formation through shared practices, responsibilities and encounters with the world.

Agency

Agency is conceptualised not as individual autonomy or self-sufficiency, but as *relational agency* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Holland et al., 1998). It is enacted through participation, dialogue and interdependence. Agency here is the ability to shape one's learning and contribute meaningfully to shared life.

Autonomy

Autonomy is understood as situated autonomy: the ethical capacity to act intentionally and responsibly within relationships and social practices. Drawing on feminist relational autonomy (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000) and Bridges's emphasis on practical competence, autonomy is seen as emerging through recognition, support, and education rather than independence or isolation (Bridges, 2002).

Relationality

Relationality is the ontological foundation of this thesis. It recognises that humans exist through relationships—with others, with place, with the more-than-human world. Relationality reshapes how we understand learning, agency, knowledge and community, providing the grounding for a manifesto that envisions education as a shared and collective practice.

1.4 Engagement with Literature

Given the scope of available literature relevant to this argument, a selective approach has been necessary. The theories, policies and research discussed here have been deliberately and strategically chosen for their relevance to the central argument: the need for a radical rethinking of primary education for the future.

In line with the broader methodological commitment and investments of the thesis, literature is integrated throughout the work rather than presented in a standalone review chapter. This integrated approach reflects the multidimensional nature of the inquiry and the complex interplay between theory and practice. The sources used in this research include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and canonical philosophical works to support the conceptual development of the manifesto. Key texts from philosophers now placed within a tradition of post-structuralism, but perhaps not self-positioned as such, have been used to interpret and critique the current system of education. Some of the ideas used were not originally written on education per se and they have been subsequently related to education more recently by different authors. These texts were not selected because of their position within the post-structuralist brackets, but because of what their argument added to my critique and my argument and rethinking. Similarly, the works from key writers within critical pedagogy have been chosen for inclusion in this thesis because of the manner in which they influence my thinking and my argument.

In addition to drawing from foundational philosophical texts and critical theory, the philosophical exploration engages with a wide array of educational research spanning diverse traditions and settings. I incorporate insights from special education, Montessori education, Waldorf Steiner approaches and alternative educational provision, including home education. These sources, ranging from academic literature to practitioner-authored texts and digital platforms such as blogs, community sites and grassroots reports, with appropriately levelled critique, provide rich, situated knowledge about how education is enacted and imagined outside of mainstream schooling structures. By bringing these varied perspectives into dialogue with philosophical inquiry, I aim to foreground the multiplicity of educational experiences and challenge normative assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge or practice in educational research. This approach also reflects my broader methodological commitment to inclusivity, interdisciplinarity and responsiveness to lived realities. This literature not only supports the theoretical and philosophical framing of the research but also demonstrates the urgency and relevance of the ideas being developed.

Darling (1993), who advocates for a dialogic engagement with historical educational thinkers, acknowledges the potential critique that analysing works written centuries ago through the lens of contemporary concerns risks anachronism. However, he argues that certain elements of the human condition and enduring societal questions transcend time, allowing past critiques and ideas to retain relevance (p. 28). This approach recognises the potency of reformist educational writings, inviting readers to actively interrogate their contemporary value rather than

relegating them to historical artefacts. Consistent with this perspective, Chapter 2, traces the genealogy of progressive thought, not merely to recount its history but to critically engage with it in relation to current educational debates. By doing so, it both illuminates the continuities and tensions within educational theories of childhood development and pedagogy and foregrounds possibilities for reimagining education today. This critical historicisation thus serves as a foundation for envisioning more just and inclusive futures in primary education. Rather than presenting a chronological history of progressive education which are widely available elsewhere (for example Tisdall, 2020, who offers insightful perspectives on its development), this chapter traces how key progressive concepts have emerged, evolved and diverged in the context of primary schooling.

1.5 Ethical considerations and positionality

Given the political nature of the argument developed here, it is essential to reflect on the ethical considerations that inform both the research process and the proposed educational reforms. This work engages with questions of justice, equity and liberation and it is crucial to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher in shaping the thesis (Mason-Bish, 2019). Berger (2015) argues that researcher positionality is not a bias to be eliminated but a condition of knowledge production. As a racialised-as-white European female, I remain conscious of my role in a field historically dominated by white scholars and the implications this has for both the research and its outcomes. Berger (2015) insists reflexivity is an ongoing analytic practice not a one-off methodological statement. Here I reflect briefly on how my experiences and identity shape my approach to education and the proposed manifesto for change. Ethical considerations also extend to how the research interacts with educational systems, policymakers and communities, with a strong emphasis on creating a space for marginalised voices and challenging systemic inequalities. The reflection on my positionality within the system of education, continues throughout the piece.

As Hall writes, ‘You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all’ (Hall, 1990, p. 18) and so I must locate myself with an awareness of my place, time, history and culture. Bourke (2014) proposes that positionality represents a space in which objectivism and subjectivism meet—a notion echoed by Hayes (2021), who reminds us that while we may strive toward objectivity, we must also remain ever mindful of our subjectivities. I understand positionality not as a static label but as a dynamic and active *stance*—one through which values, meanings and insights are interpreted and constructed while being shaped by wider economic,

political and cultural networks. My aim in this section is to clarify how my relationship with children and education informs both the substance and form of this work.

I am a teacher. My professional identity has been formed through years of practice in diverse primary school settings, most notably a 12-year period teaching Year 1 and leading Key Stage 1 in an independent London school. Academically, my undergraduate degree in Psychology introduced me to the developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, while my PGCE at the University of Cambridge opened the door to educational history and its practical implications. My Early Years specialism during this time heightened my understanding of the need for play and concepts such as child-initiated learning to be central to teaching. My Master of Education from Queen's University Belfast further deepened my understanding of classroom environments, inclusion, trauma and the relationship between policy and practice. Personally, I became a mother aged 40: an experience that has offered me a fresh and intimate view on early childhood education as I now watch my own daughter begin her formal schooling journey. These professional, academic and lived experiences inform key conceptual foundations of the thesis: the nature and purposes of education and the urgency of reform through the lens of utopian, progressive and alternative educational traditions.

First, I have come to understand education as a holistic process that transcends formal schooling, academic attainment and qualification-driven models. This belief has influenced every stage of my career—from the classroom practices I implement to the colleagues and communities I align with. My approach to curriculum, pedagogy and school culture has always been shaped by a belief in education as a transformative and child-centred endeavour. However, I also acknowledge that not all of my interventions or choices have produced their intended results. This has underscored the limits of individual action within institutional constraints and the necessity of rethinking education at the structural level.

Second, I identify as a progressive educator operating within a largely conservative, traditionalist educational system. I have worked exclusively in mainstream settings and have not enrolled my daughter in alternative education. Despite being drawn to radical pedagogies and experimental models, I have remained within the boundaries of conventional schooling. This may reflect a reluctance to step fully into the unknown or a desire to bring about change from within, rather than outside, the mainstream. My practice sits in tension with my ideals. I have long 'talked the talk' of radical education—but I now seek, through this work, 'to walk it'.

Culturally, I am a middle-class Scottish-born but England-educated, heterosexual woman who benefits from the privileges associated with these identities. I have not experienced cultural oppression or racism, and I do not share the lived experiences of many who have written manifestos from positions of marginalisation. Politically, I find myself at a crossroads. I have no loyalty to the traditional parties of the centre-right or centre-left and instead vote for those who appear most inclusive, forward-thinking and committed to change for the collective good. These influences have helped shape both the content and style of the discussion which follows. I write this manifesto in full recognition of the advantages I carry—and with humility regarding the partiality of my perspective.

When I began this project, I was largely unaware of the radical roots of manifesto writing. Fahs (2019c) notes that many students misunderstand the word 'radical' as I did. Her observation that students from marginalised identities often take more naturally to manifesto writing also resonated with me. I have had to work hard to find my place, my voice. I believe I write with greater clarity and authenticity than I did at the start. The process of writing the thesis has coincided with a period of profound change in my personal life, professional life and enormous disruption and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic prompting sustained reflection on my role in both the reproduction of and resistance to systemic educational injustices. I must acknowledge the difficulty of writing about radical educational reform at a time when so many have worked hard to return to pre-pandemic 'normality.' I do not believe we should return. I believe the role of philosophers of education is now to act as critical activists—to speak into this moment of rupture and possibility before it is too late and the unfortunate circumstances which provide an opportunity for real change are not acted upon. Now is the right time to reimagine education as something more just, inclusive and life-affirming than it has ever been before.

1.6 Conclusion

The methodology underpinning this thesis is deliberately philosophical and speculative. Rather than adopting empirical or instrumental paradigms, it treats theorising as a creative and political act—a way of unsettling what education has come to take for granted and opening space for alternative futures. This is not a neutral undertaking; it is a moral one.

Across this chapter, I have outlined a methodological constellation that shapes the inquiry. Utopian methodology provides the imaginative capacity to think beyond the constraints of the

present. Post-structuralism offers analytic tools for interrogating the discourses that construct ‘ability’, ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘knowledge’ as if they were natural truths. Critical pedagogy contributes a praxis-oriented commitment to justice, insisting that educational critique must be tied to transformation. The manifesto gives the thesis its rhetorical and philosophical form, enabling movement from diagnosis to proposition. Finally, the creative-critical elements—prolegomenon, vignettes, poetic vision—serve as methodological enactments of alternative educational possibilities.

These approaches work together to reveal how primary schooling in England is shaped by historically contingent structures that regulate children’s lives and constrain educational possibility. By exposing the contingency of these structures, the methodology helps identify where meaningful transformation might take root. It also ensures that the thesis remains grounded not only in critique but in the imaginative and ethical labour of constructing alternatives.

Chapter 2 builds directly on this foundation. It develops a genealogy of progressive and alternative educational thought, tracing how ideas of childhood, development, knowledge, space and power have been produced historically and how they inform the five themes that structure the thesis. These themes provide the conceptual scaffolding for the manifesto propositions of Chapters 3 and 4.

This methodological framework returns us to the core question guiding the thesis:

Can we reimagine mainstream primary education in England?

The approaches outlined here provide the means to engage with the question rigorously. The methodology does not simply support the thesis—it enacts its central claim that educational transformation begins with the courage to think and imagine differently. This chapter therefore closes by affirming the ethical and political stakes of the work. Reimagining education is a collective responsibility, and the methodology adopted here is intended to contribute to that ongoing and necessary project.

Chapter 2

Theoretical foundations, genealogy, argument, critique and inspiration

A thematic genealogy of progressive educational thought highlighting the need for change

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Time and development

2.2.1 Introduction

2.2.2 Developmentalism and age stage schooling

2.2.3 School readiness and the regulation of time

2.2.4 Development, normalisation and marginalisation

2.2.5 Alternative conceptions of time, growth and learning

2.2.5.1 Natural development and Enlightenment beginnings: *Rousseau*

2.2.5.2 Development meets industry: *Pestalozzi* and *Owen*

2.2.5.3 *Froebel* and the spiritualised development of the child

2.2.5.4 *Piaget* and the institutionalisation of scientific developmentalism

2.2.5.5 *Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky*

2.2.6 Conclusion

2.3 Knowledge and curriculum

2.3.1 Introduction

2.3.2 Knowledge

2.3.3 Curriculum and the National Curriculum

2.3.4 Curriculums of joy, play, wonder and hope

2.3.5 Conclusion

2.4 Power and ability

2.4.1 Introduction

2.4.2 Regimes of classification, deficit and control in assessment

2.4.3 Control and oppression in surveillance

2.4.4 Power in the unquantifiable

2.4.5 Conclusion

2.5 Space and relationality

2.5.1 Space – physical, social and emotional

2.5.1.1 Enclosure

2.5.1.2 Separation

2.5.2 Relationality

2.6 Voice and agency

2.7 Conclusion

Chapter 2 Theoretical foundations

2.1 Introduction

The thesis contends that mainstream education needs to change and, as stated in the Introduction, the system stands at a threshold. Continuing on from Chapter 1, the thesis therefore sets out a manifesto for reimagining primary education beyond its current dominant form. Throughout history, numerous educators and thinkers have sought to challenge and instil or inspire change in prevailing systems—some achieving limited success, others fading into obscurity. Alternative educational models such as Montessori and Waldorf Steiner, no longer culturally uniform models as they have adapted to diverse national, social and policy contexts (Brouillette, Attfield & Telfer-Radzat, 2025**)** continue to run parallel to the mainstream, while historical experiments like Owen's New Lanark (Owen, 1991), Pestalozzi's Neuhof (Silber, 1973), the Dartington School (Martin, 2012), Plowden's report (1967) have made significant, if sometimes short-lived, contributions. Some *experimental* schools, like Kilquhanity (Charkin, 2020) and Summerhill (Neills, 1960), operate today, standing as living counterpoints to the status quo. Each of these models, thinkers, experiments and policies plays a vital role in the broader case for change—particularly in light of a system that, the argument developed here asserts, is failing many children.

The historical and conceptual overview, developed here in Chapter 2, provides the foundation for the theoretical framework that underpins the thesis, yet it is not just a theoretical chapter. This chapter combines genealogy, critique, conceptual mapping, argument development and the building of a foundation for the manifesto propositions in Chapter 3. In line with that stated in Chapter 1 (1.2), utopianism is used in this Chapter, to reimagine what primary education could be if we freed it from inherited constraints and allowed ourselves to envision radically different futures as advocated by Freire (1972), hooks (1994) and Greene (1995). As scholars such as Walkerdine (1990) and Cannella (1997) argue, post-structuralist theory provides tools to deconstruct the dominant discourses—such as 'the child', 'normal development', 'ability' and 'school readiness'—that shape educational practice, identity and power relations in the classroom. Drawing on Freire (1972), hooks (1994) and Giroux (2011), critical pedagogy provides a political and ethical framework for confronting power relations in education, centring voice, agency and collective transformation. In excavating the foundations of the current system, the chapter aims not simply to critique but to open up a space for imagining otherwise. The contemporary system of primary education in England is not a neutral or natural arrangement. It is the result of centuries of shifting ideas about children, learning, discipline, normality and

progress—ideas that have been shaped by social, political, ideological forces (Ball, 2013) and international perspectives and comparisons. As scholars have argued (for example, Ball, 1990, Foucault, 1977, Popkewitz, 2004) the ways in which we structure classrooms, measure achievement and manage behaviour are deeply rooted in historical decisions and dominant constructions of childhood.

The chapter traces how the concept of the child has been institutionalised through frameworks of chronological age, developmental psychology and behavioural control, beginning with early efforts at mass education with systems like the Monitorial schools of Bell and Lancaster (Mesquita, 2012, Hamilton, 1989). Educational systems built around a logic of children as deficient, unfinished and in need of management rely heavily on scientific and pseudo-scientific claims about development, ability and normality. These contribute to a culture of surveillance, labelling and inequality. Drawing on diverse and contrasting research, the argument challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be a 'normal child', how development should be measured and who education is for. The Introduction emphasised the system crisis as a whole and, although this key chapter focuses on children's experiences within the system, it does so with a mind to changing education for all. The focus on children's experience within the system is an indication of the authors' positionality, declared in Chapter 1, and a desire to make education better, but particularly education lived through the child's view.

> ***'The Map We're Making' — A Child's View***
>
> *I'm making a map, but it's not of a country or anything. It's of everything I've learned this week—and the paths I took to find it. There's a line that starts at the pond, where we found frogspawn and it loops to the shed where I wrote a poem about becoming a frog. Then there's a swirl over to the kitchen garden where I learned the word 'germination' just by watching and wondering. No one gave me that word—I asked for it.*
>
> *At my school, learning doesn't wait for permission. It doesn't sit still. It's everywhere and it happens because I want to know things. I am always asking questions, and everyone here seems to think that's a good thing. No one says, 'Not now,' or 'That's not on the lesson plan.' If I'm curious, that's the plan.*
>
> *I don't have to sit in rows or copy from a board. I choose what I want to explore and then I explore it—with friends, or by myself, or with an adult who's really more like a fellow adventurer. Yesterday, I wanted to know why the moon sometimes shows up in the daytime. Today, I'm making a shadow clock to see if I can tell the time by light. I*

don't always finish things the same day. Sometimes I stop and come back later, when I've thought more or found something new. It's like learning is a river and I get to swim in it however I want.

Our learning spaces are everywhere—under trees, in the workshop, near the firepit, at the drawing table. The older children help us sometimes and we help them too. It's like we're all different kinds of clever. Everyone is always making, wondering, solving, creating. There's a hum, like bees, but it's made of ideas. You can feel it.

The imagined narrative above, could express the views of a modern Emile, a child from Dewey's Laboratory School, a child in a current Reggio Emila inspired school, or it could be every child in the future. The thesis Introduction, the prolegomenon and the narrative above promise ethical possibilities and imaginative futures, which the conclusions of each section of this Chapter will develop. Leading to the conclusions in sections 2.2 - 2.6 there is a critique of mainstream education. There is questioning inspired by historical imaginings and alternative systems and then there is wondering.

As noted, the argument for change advanced here underpins the proposals of the manifesto, is historicised, critically examined and informed by utopian thinking, post-structuralist analysis and critical pedagogy. The chapter moves beyond a descriptive account of what has occurred and what occurs at the margins of mainstream education and instead offers a sustained argument about what might be possible in the reimagining of education. Proposing that a new system of education should be child-honouring, community-rooted and liberatory requires that the argument questions the very structures and assumptions that have come to feel natural.

Chapter 2 is structured around the five interconnected themes explained in the Introduction as the conceptual architecture. The themes have been chosen as organising categories not simply for convenience, but because they represent enduring and contested dimensions of educational thought and practice, as discussed in Chapter 1. They allow for a genealogical interrogation of how schooling has evolved and what it has come to value or marginalise. Each theme highlights a foundational tension within primary schooling that directly aligns with the core ambitions of the chapter and its accompanying manifesto in Chapter 3. The five themes collectively serve to unpick the inherited assumptions of the current system while offering conceptual ground from which to reimagine alternatives. They allow for a critical synthesis of traditions while remaining focused on the manifesto's radical aims.

In 2.2 of this chapter, **Development and time,** we argue that a fundamental assumption of current mainstream educational thought needs reconsidered. Grouping by age in schools may

have had its beginnings in medieval times (Hamilton, 1989). Enlightenment categorisation, development systems and supposedly 'scientific' understanding of how humans learn lent incontrovertible weight to the age classificatory system (Gillard, 2018, Hamilton & Zufiaurre, 2014). A system which grouped children seemed a necessity when it came to planning and resourcing mass education on an unparalleled scale in the later nineteenth century (Hamilton, 1989). From the Second World War to today the system became the legislative and policy norm in most industrial and commercial societies, including England (Tisdall, 2020). Age grouping and categorisation by age has hence long been a cornerstone of educational systems worldwide (Socol, Moran & Ratliff, 2018) but has been blamed for injustice and inequalities in the school system by campaign groups such as PACEY (2015). Children's lives outside and around school systems follow much more complex patterns (Mary, 2014). Research often critiques age categorisation, citing, for example, diverse learning paces (Díaz, et al., 2015), the promotion of fixed mindsets (Sigmundsson et al., 2022), social dynamics and peer relationships as key problems for it (Maunder & Monks, 2019). Children develop at different rates intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Age-based grouping often fails to accommodate these differences, leading to some pupils succeeding and others failing. Age-based progression can reinforce a fixed mindset, where children and teachers see their own and their pupils' abilities as static and tied to their age. This can hinder motivation and growth (Caruso, 2023).

Inspirational texts by Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Owen, who began their projects before teaching by age was established as a mainstream norm, offer much to consider regarding development. Historical and contemporary models such as rural settings, Small Schools and Montessori have long challenged the developmental assumptions underpinning age-segregated classrooms out of necessity or philosophy. Multi-age learning disrupts the rigid temporalities of linear progress and allows for more organic, individual trajectories (Veenman, 1995, Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023, Domingo-Peñafiel & Tomàs, 2015, Moore, 2018). By creating overlapping age cohorts or 'learning pods,' children are positioned as both learners and mentors, enabling social-emotional development alongside academic growth (Lillard, 2005, Cossentino, 2006, Montessori, 2014). This model contests the view of schooling tied to standardised, age-based benchmarks and instead aligns with a more ecological, developmentalist understanding of education. Forest Schools challenge the system on pace, flow and cyclical learning (Murray & O'Brien, 2005; Waite, Bølling & Bentsen, 2016). Reconfiguring the structure of time in school—as something flexible, cyclic and responsive—supports a more humane and inclusive learning environment that nurtures both continuity and difference.

In 2.3, **Knowledge and curriculum,** we argue that Alternative Provision (AP), Reggio Emilia inspired settings, Forest School, Shop Front Schools (Dennison, 1972) and some home schooling, demonstrate how mainstream curriculum needs reimagined. These alternatives argue for vocational, practical, environmental and life-oriented learning. Different epistemologies or curriculum logics can be valued (Whitebread et al., 2017; Knight, 2013; Louv, 2005a, 2005b). When education is grounded in real-world contexts—through apprenticeships, community projects and practical skills such as financial literacy and digital competence—children, especially those alienated by traditional academic pathways, are more likely to re-engage. Almond (2020) critiques technicist interpretations of curriculum coherence and argues that curriculum content should be intellectually connected, cumulatively meaningful and educationally purposeful. This approach rejects the narrow conception of knowledge as abstract and universal and instead reclaims the curriculum as a living, evolving body of situated practices. Place-based and project-based learning embed curriculum within local cultures, economies and ecologies, underscoring that meaningful knowledge arises through relevance, utility and lived experience. Knowledge can be emergent, ecological, playful rather than abstract, canonical, colonised or adult-designed.

Power and ability, in 2.4, is argued to be in need of reimagining in mainstream education. Alternative settings such as Special Schools and APs demonstrate the possibility of developing strategies to meet diverse learning needs in ways that prioritise dignity and access. The removal of assessment structures and compulsory comparison and competition could lead to inclusion, in this inquiry, understood not simply as integration, but as a structural and pedagogical commitment to equity. Research illustrates how mainstream misconceptions of ability, behaviour and readiness function as technologies of power. Some analyse how ability is constructed and how institutional categories configure who belongs and who is positioned as ‘special’, behind or difficult (Taylor, 2012; Thompson & Pennacchia, 2014). This means rethinking systems of power—such as fixed timetables, standardised assessments and punitive behaviour policies—that often exclude neurodivergent or socio-economically disadvantaged students. It is argued that flexibility must be built into the design of the system itself, including personalised pathways, sensory-aware environments and multi-agency support for mental health. Education systems have positive duties to correct structural disadvantage, not merely to refrain from discrimination (Brando, 2016). By decentring normative assumptions about ability and success, the education system becomes capable of nurturing the full range of human variation.

Alternative models such as Forest Schools, outdoor learning and rural village schools exemplify the power of space in shaping educational experiences. In 2.5, **Space and relationality**, the argument explores how these environments offer more than just a backdrop—they actively participate in the pedagogical process. Forest Schools and Common Worlds literature, in particular, illustrate how nature-based, unbounded learning spaces encourage exploration, autonomy and resilience. Within such frameworks, classrooms are not confined by walls but extended into the local environment, fostering embodied learning and relational connection to place. Translating this insight into mainstream contexts requires a radical reconfiguration of space: adaptable classrooms, sensory-friendly zones and outdoor learning embedded into daily routines. When space is designed to accommodate curiosity, reflection and social interaction, it cultivates a pedagogical culture where relationships—between learners, educators and environments—flourish.

Some traditional, hierarchical power structures still exist within teaching, with, for example, children sometimes experiencing few opportunities to have a say in their learning or in how and when they access their educational experience (McMullen & Rouse, 2012; Lundy, 2007). The argument explores **Agency and voice**, in 2.6. There have been significant changes, particularly following the COVID-19 Pandemic and with advances in technology and innovation, however, for the majority of children in mainstream schools learning takes place with other children in the same age-cohort in the classroom and with a teacher who realises and actualises the statutory, age-based curriculum. Dennison's *The Lives of Children* (1972) describes a pedagogy rooted in trust, freedom and relational depth. Central to this is the belief that children thrive when their voices are heard and their individuality honoured. A relational model of teaching deconstructs the authoritative role of the teacher and replaces it with a co-learner and mentor stance as described by this imagined narrative.

> ***'The Day We Followed the Wind' — A Teacher's Reflection***
> *This morning, I arrived early, before the children. The sky was already restless—grey clouds moving quickly overhead and the trees stirring with energy. I tucked a few supplies into my bag: charcoal sticks, string, tracing paper and a small hand-held anemometer. I had a feeling the day would begin outdoors.*
> *Sure enough, as the children filtered in, the wind pulled at jackets and hair. There was no need to summon their attention—it was already captured. Kai was the first to speak it aloud: 'I think the wind's trying to tell us something.' And with that, our inquiry*

emerged—unexpected but no less rich. I didn't redirect them to the 'planned' activity. I followed their momentum.

My role in that moment was not to lead with answers, but to notice what might be possible. I invited them into the meadow, where I laid out small provocations—light fabrics, bamboo sticks, magnifying lenses. Some children danced with the cloth, mapping the wind with their bodies. Others watched how it lifted blades of grass or shifted the flight of crows overhead. I moved quietly, offering materials, asking questions like, 'What does the wind do to the world?' or 'Can you catch it without stopping it?' Their ideas spiralled outward.

Later, when I saw Zadie struggling to anchor a weathervane she'd built from cardboard and a pencil, I knelt beside her. 'What's not working yet?' I asked and waited. She pointed to where it kept spinning too freely. I didn't fix it. I offered her a strip of felt and a suggestion to test friction. She lit up. It wasn't about giving her the solution—it was about staying close enough to help her reach it herself. That's the kind of scaffolding I've learned to trust - timely, minimal, respectful.

Back in the studio space, we circled together to share what we'd found. I didn't stand at the front. I sat among them. We passed around our drawings, our wind-maps, our words. Amari, usually quiet, asked if he could share his sound recording of the trees creaking. We listened. Then we discussed. I didn't facilitate with a fixed agenda, but with open curiosity—'What are we learning about listening?' 'Whose voice haven't we heard yet?' We make meaning together, not alone. It's a small act of democracy each time we do this.

In this place, I do not control learning—I curate it. I prepare the space with care, knowing the environment is our co-teacher. I tune into the tempo of the children, sensing when to hold back and when to lean in. I do not pretend to know all the answers. My authority doesn't come from certainty, but from attentiveness, presence and trust in the process. I am still learning to listen well.

When I look at the children at the end of a day like this—muddy-kneed, wide-eyed, full of questions—I feel the strange joy of not having taught in the old sense. I feel instead that I've participated in something much larger. Not a lesson, but a shared becoming.

This shift invites children to participate actively in shaping their own educational journeys. Voice, here, is not tokenistic. It is embedded in the structures of curriculum co-creation, formative assessment and everyday classroom practice. To enact this in policy and practice, class sizes must be reconsidered, assessment must shift from exam results to narrative feedback

and time must be carved out for one-to-one relationships and meaningful dialogue. The success of many alternative models, such as democratic schools, depends not just on their pedagogy but on the autonomy granted to educators (Durr, 2005). A transformative system must move away from managerialism and toward a culture of professional trust. Teachers must be supported to innovate, reflect and adapt without the constraint of rigid benchmarks or performative accountability. This includes reducing reliance on standardised testing and reimagining professional development as an inquiry-based, collaborative process rooted in alternative pedagogies. When teachers are given the freedom to respond to their students with creativity and care, education becomes not a system of compliance, but one of craftsmanship where intrinsic motivation and divergent thought exists (Whitebread et al., 2017). Work by Freire, hooks and Andreotti anchor the epistemic and ethical case for shared authorship of learning.

Across these thematic strands, the manifesto proposes more than a set of policy tweaks. It outlines a philosophical and structural reimagining of what education could become. Drawing on insights from diverse alternative models and situating them within educational philosophy and critical pedagogical traditions, this vision calls for an education system founded on relationality, responsiveness and justice. Time, space, power and curriculum must be reworked to reflect the realities of children's lives and the professional insight of educators. Through a phased national transformation, these proposals offer a coherent path away from standardisation and towards a system in which every child not only belongs but thrives. The goal is to move from exception to norm: scaling up the conditions that help children flourish. To move towards a more inclusive, responsive vision of education, we must ask: What if development were viewed not as a predictable staircase but as a field of possibilities? What if the child were seen not as 'incomplete' but as *already* whole, with evolving identities and capacities? These questions underpin the chapter's wider argument that educational time, and the developmental assumptions that scaffold it, must be rethought if we are to design realistic and possible systems that affirm, rather than constrain, children's lives in schools.

2.2 Development and time

2.2.1 Introduction

This section interrogates time, development and readiness as foundational yet deeply contested organising principles of schooling. It argues that dominant educational systems are

structured by assumptions of linear development and rigid, segmented temporality. These assumptions shape curriculum design, assessment practices, school architecture and children's everyday experiences. In contrast, the manifesto (Chapter 3) proposes a reconfiguration of educational time. It looks to one that is flexible, responsive and attuned to children's rhythms rather than imposed developmental schedules. This includes questioning age categorisation, fixed timetables, rigid attendance patterns (see Cocoron et al., 2024) and the sharp division between 'learning' and 'non-learning' time.

Rather than asking how children can be made ready for school, this section asks how schooling might become ready for children (Rogers & Rose, 2007). Through a focused genealogical engagement with historical progressive and critical educational thinkers including Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Owen, Dewey, Froebel, Montessori and Vygotsky, it develops a set of interrupting questions: What would it mean to imagine time as relational or cyclical rather than linear? Could learning be organised around thresholds of understanding rather than ages or hours served? How might education become a space of encounter and emergence rather than preparation and measurement?

2.2.2 Developmentalism and Age-Stage Schooling

The concept of development has long occupied a central position in educational theory, particularly within early and primary education. It has shaped how learning is sequenced, how progress is measured and how children are positioned within institutions. Yet development is neither neutral nor universally agreed (Burman, 2008). It is bound to particular temporal imaginaries—most notably linear, age-related progression—and to normative expectations about what children should achieve and when (Egan, 1984). Developmentalist frameworks, especially those grounded in psychological stage theories, often adopt a teleological orientation, treating education as a journey toward idealised outcomes such as rationality, autonomy or productivity (Egan, 2002). Within this logic, the child is positioned as perpetually 'becoming' rather than fully 'being'. As Wall (2010) observes, children are valued primarily for what they will become, not for who they are now. Childhood thus becomes a deficit state, justified only by its proximity to future usefulness (Burman, 2008).

Post-structural critiques reveal that developmental theories do not simply describe children; they actively produce categories of normality and deviation (Walkerdine, 1984; Burman, 2008; MacLure, 2013). Age becomes a disciplinary mechanism—a way to order, compare and exclude.

Chronological age remains the primary organising principle of English primary education (Robinson, 2009; Joshi Hansen, 2018), structuring year cohorts, curricular expectations and assessment benchmarks. In England, the National Curriculum reinforces this logic through year-specific outcomes and linear progression models that leave little space for divergent developmental trajectories. This age-stage system disproportionately marginalises children whose development does not conform to normative timelines, including summer-born pupils, neurodivergent learners and children from minoritised cultural or linguistic backgrounds (Bell & Daniels, 1990; Tomlinson, 2005; Slee, 2011; Youdell, 2006). The language of 'falling behind' frames difference as failure and legitimises interventions designed to accelerate conformity rather than honour variation (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018). In this way, developmentalism functions not merely as pedagogy but as a technology of governmentality (Foucault, 1977), regulating bodies, behaviours and futures.

2.2.3 School Readiness and the Regulation of Time

Closely connected to developmentalism is the concept of school readiness. Readiness is typically defined as the extent to which a child has reached a developmental stage deemed necessary to cope with the demands of school (Henty, 2020; Kamphorst et al., 2021). While often framed as child-centred, readiness discourse frequently serves to justify rigid starting ages, standardised curricula and early assessment regimes (Pohlmann-Rother, Wehner & Kaiser-Kratzmann, 2024). Developmental benchmarks are treated as universal rather than culturally and socially situated (Alexander, 2010). In England, children begin formal schooling earlier than in many comparable countries, entering Reception at four or five years old. This early start is often defended on economic or comparative grounds rather than developmental ones (Purdham et al., 2024). Daniels, Shorrocks-Taylor and Redfern (2000) show that allowing children to start school earlier does not reliably improve National Curriculum outcomes, arguing instead that age-standardised assessment frameworks themselves generate persistent disadvantage by misaligning curriculum expectations with developmental variability. Research on the Relative Age Effect (RAE) demonstrates that younger children within a cohort are systematically disadvantaged by age-based expectations that ignore developmental variability (Barnsely, Thompason & Barnsley, 1985; Sharp, Hutchinson & Whetton, 1994; Sharp, 1995; Crawford, Dearden & Greaves, 2013; Smith, 2022; Fredriksson & Ockert, 2014). Smith (2022) argues, these effects are artefacts of the system, not intrinsic deficits within children. Givord (2020) states that RAEs are amplified by early tracking and high-stakes assessment systems.

Temporal regulation extends beyond starting age to encompass the organisation of the school day, week and year. Fixed timetables, strict punctuality rules and long summer holidays reflect industrial and neoliberal logics of productivity and control (Shove, 2020). Chambers, Smilie and Watson (2024) show how leisure time now is reframed as deficit time, rather than necessary space for rest, play and self-directed activity. Holiday provision becomes a site where social inequality is reproduced, not alleviated (Monfrance, Haelermans & Schils, 2024). Learning is treated as a scarce resource to be optimised, producing pedagogies of acceleration, surveillance and anxiety (Davies, 2009). Chrononormativity privileges speed, efficiency and linear progress while devaluing slow, recursive and exploratory learning (Mountz et al., 2015). Empirical research on biological rhythms challenge the assumption that uniform schedules support all learners. Children's sleep patterns, attention spans and energy levels vary widely (Carskadon, 2011), yet schooling largely ignores this variability (Crowley et al., 2018). Debates around school start times and year-round schooling highlight the mismatch between institutional timetables and developmental wellbeing (Wheaton et al., 2016; McMullen & Rouse, 2012; Eglitis et al., 2024a, b, c).

2.2.4 Development, Normalisation and Marginalisation

Assessment systems intensify the regulatory effects of developmental time. In England, early assessments—including the EYFS Profile, Reception Baseline Assessment and phonics screening—evaluate children against narrow, age-linked benchmarks, labelling those who diverge as deficient (Bradbury, 2018, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Such practices disproportionately affect summer-born children, neurodivergent learners and children from marginalised communities, reinforcing structural inequality under the guise of objectivity (Gillborn, 2008). Carr (2001) reconceptualises assessment in early childhood as a narrative, formative practice that documents learning dispositions and participation, arguing that assessment shapes learner identity and should affirm agency, belonging, and competence rather than measure performance.

School readiness becomes increasingly conflated with behavioural compliance, further narrowing what counts as legitimate learning (MacNaughton, 2005; Moss, 2013) and it can have long-term implications (Purdam et al., 2024). Developmental norms are naturalised within school cultures, obscuring their role as regulatory discourses that normalise exclusion (Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). As Laval (2018) argues, such systems enact a form of

structural violence by forcing children to adapt to schooling rather than adapting schooling to children.

Alternative conceptions of time and development are not only imaginable but are already practiced, through choice, philosophy or necessity. Mixed-age groupings, flexible timetables, year-round provision and relational pacing—found in Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Forest Schools, Small Schools in rural and urban settings and some alternative provisions—demonstrate that linear developmentalism is neither inevitable nor necessary. Boix and Domingo-Peñafiel (2005), drawing on rural schooling in Spain, show how education systems often frame rural difference through compensatory logics that pathologise deviation from urban norms, thereby constraining the inclusive potential of multi-age, community-based schools — a tension that resonates strongly with the positioning of rural and small schools in England. Education organised around developmental fluidity, rather than fixed timelines, offers more humane and inclusive conditions for learning (Little, 2001). These alternatives lay the conceptual groundwork for the manifesto's call which, in line with Morss' (1996) advancement of non-linear, relational and cultural alternatives to stage-based development, aims to dismantle age-based categorisation and reimagine educational time as responsive, plural and just.

2.2.5 Alternative conceptions of time, growth and learning – reimagining time and development in education

In 2.2.5, the argument is advanced towards the manifesto proposals regarding time and development through engagement with educational thinkers who have challenged dominant approaches to schooling. Disparate in method, intention and expression, what connects them is a profound commitment to resisting educational practices that follow the rules of their 'mainstream education'. The help to build the argument against systems which restrict development to age related expectations and universal trajectories and consideration of the impact of 'time' in the endeavour to care for our children in education. Together, these thinkers and movements have, since the late 18th century, questioned prevailing educational norms and practices. Their work offers far-reaching insights into education as a process of freedom, creativity and ethical formation critically and not overly romantically. While their approaches often differ, their work collectively underpins the trajectory of this argument: that education must be reimagined as a radically democratic (e.g. Neill, Bloom), child-centred (e.g. Dewey, Vygotsky, Froebel, UNICEF, 2013, The Children's Act 1989) and emancipatory practice

(e.g. Pestalozzi, Freire) and that this is possible if we consider the impact of development and time in current mainstream education settings.

Rousseau's *Émile* (1991) initiated a philosophical reimagining of childhood as a distinct phase, worthy of its own rhythms and moral consideration. While Rousseau's model still followed a developmental arc, it rejected premature instruction and insisted on education as a natural unfolding rather than mechanical input (Darling, 1993). Pestalozzi built on this by embedding the child in relational care and sensory experience, arguing for an education 'of the hand, the heart and the head' sensitive to the child's holistic context (Herbert, 2004). Owen's New Lanark schools demonstrated that mixed-age, play-rich environments could be socially transformative. His model resisted the factory logics of the industrial era and instead embraced an educational rhythm that was collective, affective and child responsive (Davis & O'Hagan, 2010). Similarly, Froebel's kindergarten was conceived not as a staging ground for future workers, but as a symbolic, intergenerational play space, rooted in the child's relational engagement with nature and creativity (Beatty, 2017). The theories, philosophies and utopias explored and enacted upon by these inspirational progressive educational thinkers are discussed predominantly in this section, 2.2.5, of Chapter 2 entitled 'Development and Time', but their influence is important in many of the other themes explored in 2.3-2.6. The themes are necessarily interrelated, accordingly, to remove the risk of repetition across the themes, the discussion is presented in a predominantly chronological order, and notes are made within each section of where the work of these chosen inspirers aids the argument towards other manifesto proposals more fully explored in their own right in subsequent sections 2.3-2.6.

2.2.5.1. Natural Development and Enlightenment Beginnings: Rousseau

Rousseau's *Émile*, or *On Education* (1991), is widely regarded as a foundational text in modern educational philosophy. His portrayal of the child as innately good and best supported when allowed to follow the natural rhythms of individual development has exerted enduring influence on conceptions of childhood and pedagogical practice. While situated within the Enlightenment context, Rousseau's vision continues to resonate in contemporary debates about child-centredness, natural learning and developmentally appropriate education (Baker, 2001). This inquiry into education draws on Rousseau's key principles as a foundation for reimagining the aims, structures and tempos of primary education. In doing so, it aligns with Rousseau's critique of premature instruction and artificial constraint, proposing a pedagogical model that takes seriously the child's own individual capacities, interests and timings. Rousseau constructs the

child as a natural subject, whose unfolding is guided by an organic, internal developmental timetable (Crain, 2005).

Rousseau's immense influence on progressive educational pedagogy and philosophy is evident in several enduring ideas. He emphasised staged development, where each phase of childhood has its own logic and value (Egan, 1984). He championed experiential, interest-led learning as an alternative to rote instruction and envisioned the educator as a guide who carefully prepares the environment rather than dictating content - 'Begin, then, by studying your pupils better' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 34). Additionally, Rousseau critiqued early socialisation, particularly the corrupting influence of societal conventions on the child's natural goodness. Rousseau's conviction that 'everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 37) reflects his belief in the child's innate moral purity and the corrupting influence of social institutions. Rousseau legitimised the child as a figure worthy of study and care in their own right —someone in a distinct and precious phase of life. His work gave educational theorists and reformers a philosophical basis for delaying academic pressures, resisting authoritarian schooling and embracing a slower, more respectful pace of learning. Hence, Rousseau's work directly supports the manifesto proposals of 'We demand time' and 'We refuse the tyranny of age' asserted in section 2.2, but also inspires the manifesto proposals of trusting the child to lead, reclaiming play, wonder and the arts as essential, rejecting curriculum as commandment, challenging the violence of assessment, declaring learning to be relational learning with land not apart from it and defending the joy of not knowing explored in sections 2.3-2.6.

However, it is also precisely Rousseau's foundational role that invites a critical revisiting especially by work which claims to be inspired by his work. As we seek to ground progressive education in social justice and inclusivity, Rousseau's universal claims must be understood within a historical context and structural critique (Darling, 1993). Rousseau's vision operates within a utopian imaginary of perfectibility, while simultaneously embedding logics of exclusion. At stake is the tension between utopian hope and normative closure, a tension which will be contentious with many following progressive educational thinkers, and which continues to shape contemporary notions of developmental progression in education.

Poststructuralist critiques have complicated Rousseau's legacy. Scholars such as Cannella (1997) and Burman (2008) have argued that Rousseau's ideal of the 'natural child' conceals deeply exclusionary premises. The universal child in *Émile* is implicitly male, white, European and middle-class. Sophie, the female counterpart, is constructed not as a developing subject

in her own right but as a future wife, destined to serve the needs of the male protagonist. In this sense, Rousseau's child is both radical and regulated: a romantic image of freedom that is underwritten by hidden systems of cultural and gendered constraint. Mellor (1993) describes how Wollstonecraft (1992) discussed the 'errors and evils of the dominant bourgeois gender definition of the female as the subordinate helpmate of the male' (p. 35). She 'attacked' Rousseau for the disappointing sketch of the ideal woman he drew. Albertson (2024) argues that while Rousseau's concept of natural education seems liberatory, it constructs boys into rational, autonomous political agents, while girls are shaped for submission and domesticity. Furthermore, while later progressivism embraced Rousseau's image of the child as innately good and naturally unfolding, his work also contains deeply moralistic undertones tied to notions of virtue, obedience and the ideal citizen (Dent, 1998). In this sense, Rousseau's 'naturalism' is not simply liberatory, but embedded in Enlightenment notions of rational self-governance and the construction of the future political subject (Mellor, 1993, Arneil, 1999).

Rousseau's ideas in *Émile* were profoundly utopian and markedly alternative, particularly when considered against the socio-historical backdrop of mid-eighteenth-century France. At a time when childhood was scarcely recognised as a distinct developmental stage—especially among the lower classes—children were often subjected to harsh discipline, premature labour and limited, if any, educational opportunities (Aries 1962; Darnton 1984). Where education did exist, it was typically rigid, doctrinal and designed to instil obedience rather than cultivate autonomy or critical reasoning (Compayré, 1907; Ozouf 1999). Within this context, Rousseau's advocacy for a natural, child-centred education that respected developmental stages and prioritised experiential learning represented a radical departure from prevailing pedagogical norms (Bloom, 1978). 'Childhood,' Rousseau declared, 'has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to try and substitute ours for theirs' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 90). His vision thus called for conditions of upbringing and instruction that were rarely attainable within the material realities of the *Ancien Régime* (Damrosch 2005; Jones 2002). The disjunction between Rousseau's educational ideals and the structural constraint of his time thus highlights the utopian character of *Émile*, positioning it as both a critique of contemporary institutions and a speculative model for a reformed and morally grounded society. 'If children jumped all at once from the breast to the age of reason, the education they are given might be suitable for them. But according to the natural progress, they need an entirely contrary one' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 93) Rousseau's ideal of the child developing 'naturally', was a flavour of his own philosophical influence from Inner Light and Rhineland writers from the previous century (Davis, 2020) and a response to the rigid, religiously dominated education of his time, which he saw as suppressing individuality and spontaneity. 'A

child must not be constrained […] they have to jump, run and shout when they wish' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 86).

At the heart of *Émile* is the belief that development should not be rushed. 'Dare I expose the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of all education? It is not to gain time but lose it' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 93). Childhood is not a deficiency, Rousseau insists, but a stage of being in its own right. His educational model is, on the surface, one of respect for the child's temporality — an apparent critique of premature instruction and adult imposition. This temporal respect — allowing the child to be a child — resonates with other leading later progressive educators such as Froebel, Montessori and Dewey. Rousseau advised readers to 'love childhood; promote its games, its pleasures, its amiable instinct' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 79).

Rousseau's insistence that education should be grounded in the learner's own experiences, rather than imposed externally, also laid the groundwork for a pedagogy that views the child not as an empty vessel, but as an active, sense-making subject. Yet his assumptions were that children were confined to what Piaget would later call 'concrete operations' until the age of twelve years old. He proposed that any twelve-year-old who had read or been taught had learned by heart because that is the only way they could assimilate non-experiential material (Rousseau, 1991, Book II). Children needed to learn through experience in order that it was meaningful and lasting. Modern critiques of experiential learning centre around its slow and laborious nature - a waste of time (Darling, 1993), but Rousseau states that what is paramount is whether the child understands. Rousseau linked the natural development of the growth of plants to the development of children. 'Make progress by slow and sure steps' (Rousseau, 1991, p. 232).

In line with Rousseau's principle regarding time, the perspective taken in this work challenges the recommendations taken up by the current English National Curriculum of Young and Muller (2013), who champion 'powerful knowledge' to accelerate the pace of learning. Hastening the educational process undermines the possibility of delaying subject matter until the pupil can engage with it meaningfully. Further, when learners are exposed prematurely to content they are not yet able to grasp, the excitement of novelty may quickly give way to frustration, disinterest, or even aversion—particularly in subjects or skills for which they have not yet developed curiosity or cognitive enthusiasm. Hardman (2019) echoes this challenge, asking how a child might access knowledge that takes them as Young (2011) describes it 'beyond their experience' (p. 269). The tension here lies in recognising the importance of introducing

epistemically stretching knowledge without disregarding the learner and their needs. Rousseau suggested that education should not artificially accelerate the pace of learning:

> But to feed his curiosity, never hurry to satisfy it. Put the questions within his reach and leave them to him to resolve. Let him know something not because you told it to him but because he has understood it himself. Let him not learn science but discover it. (Rousseau, 1991, p. 168).

Rousseau aimed to cultivate independent learners with resourceful minds—individuals capable of discovering things for themselves and, as a result, coping with a wide range of circumstances. From this perspective, a good education involves fostering the capacities and dispositions required for solving practical problems (Darling, 1993). Harris (2012), however, challenges Rousseau's position, as well as Piaget's later views, by arguing that humans inhabit a fundamentally cultural world, much of which cannot be understood unless its meaning is mediated by others. Learning from the testimony of others is therefore indispensable. Similarly, Moll (2020) contends that mainstream psychology of learning has largely failed to treat communication as epistemically foundational, with notable exceptions within the Vygotskian tradition (e.g. Rogoff, 2003). This highlights an important distinction between passive instruction—being simply told—and learning that occurs through communicative engagement with others, a distinction Rousseau fundamentally rejected. Relationality, understood in this sense, is an essential element of Rousseau inspired education and will be explored further in Section 2.5. Dewey credited Rousseau for liberating the child from oppressive adult expectations but faulted him for his isolationist conception of education, detached from social interaction: 'He freed the child from the oppressive weight of adult notions, but he left him alone with nature' (Dewey, 2004, p. 13). Nevertheless, important dimensions of the developmental model that Rousseau inaugurated have had a profound and lasting influence. Rousseau, above all, valued childhood as unique, with capacities unique to childhood which must be prized.

Critics of developmentalism, such as Egan (2002) philosophical accounts of education by Masschelein and colleagues (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003; Masschelein & Simons, 2013), argue that Rousseau's model helped establish a tradition in which childhood is valued less and an end in itself than as a preparatory stage oriented toward future adulthood. Such logic produces both anxiety and governance — if one is always 'on the way' to something else, one is never quite 'finished', never fully formed. The child, then, is perpetually not-yet — a temporal subject whose worth lies in potential rather than presence (Wall, 2021). The criticisms are important to note and learn from. Yet Rousseau's utopianism retains a radical potential. His suspicion of societal corruption, his belief in the uniqueness of each learner's pace and his faith

in education as a means to human flourishing and democracy all provide valuable provocations. The challenge for educators and scholars today is not to reject Rousseau outright, but to approach his legacy with critical fidelity — to draw inspiration from his hopes while recognising the limitations of his historical positioning. In doing so, we can begin to ask broader questions about *whose* child is assumed in our policies, curricula and classrooms. Rousseau invites us to slow down, to trust the child's unfolding — but critics also remind us of the dangers of constructing an abstract, ideal child to whom all must conform. In this tension between progressive inspiration and historical exclusion, we locate a key thread that runs through this chapter which is in line with Freire's insistence but specific to development and time in education: the developmental time of education is never neutral (Burman, 2008). It is always shaped by power, by cultural assumptions and by contested visions of what children are and what they should become:

> Émile is animated by a powerful utopian imagination... the child becomes both promise and project, a site upon which the moral regeneration of the state might be built (Holland, 1992, p. 5).

While Rousseau's utopia was narrow, it reminds us that education is always about imagining futures. The anticipatory move here is to expand and pluralise the kinds of futures we prepare children for — not a single moral citizen, but a world of diverse identities, knowledges and contributions. The transformative potential of education lies in reclaiming its radical ambition as a form of world-building, but without the rigid normativity characteristic of Rousseau's republic. Instead, curricula and pedagogies should be designed to help children imagine and engage with multiple possible futures, rather than aiming solely toward a singular notion of an *ideal* adulthood. Education must be cultivated as a speculative, poetic and socially imaginative practice. A practice that goes beyond mere preparation for the workforce or standardised test outcomes. Proposals of formative, narrative, relational assessment is further explored in 2.4.

Rousseau's bias regarding 'the universal child' reveals a structural tendency in educational thought to universalise a narrow experience. A more just education system actively confronts this. The transformative potential of education also involves designing policies, environments and curricula that are explicitly and truly inclusive in their approach. Instead of relying on one-size-fits-all benchmarks, equity-driven frameworks should be prioritised, asking fundamentally what each child needs to thrive. Rousseau's careful staging of development becomes, through poststructuralist critique, a warning about normalised timelines and developmental expectations. But this also opens space to imagine new educational tempos — ones that are more relational, responsive and liberatory. This requires challenging the concept of *readiness*

as a gatekeeping mechanism and instead developing more inclusive models of learning that allow for varied trajectories and systems which remove age segregation.

Embracing temporal multiplicity acknowledges that children grow, regress, leap and loop in their development and educational design should reflect and accommodate this complex, non-linear process. Rousseau's asymmetrical teacher–pupil relationship invites us to reimagine pedagogy as co-constructed, dialogic and political. Children must not be objects of development, but subjects of learning with agency, perspective and voice. Transformative potential also lies in replacing the 'invisible hand' of the benevolent tutor with relational pedagogies that emphasise mutuality, consent and responsiveness. Education, inspired by Rousseauian thinking, should centre children's lived experiences, cultures and identities as valuable sources for the curriculum, rather than viewing them as deficits to be corrected. This approach involves practising critical listening and responsive planning, allowing children's own questions, curiosities and concerns to shape the direction of learning. Children become co-constructors and teachers are co-researchers in the unfolding of meaning as proposed by the manifesto, where children are not told what to think but invited to think with. These Rousseauian inspired ideas are proposed and scrutinised in the following sections 2.3-2.6.

By critically historicising Rousseau's thoughts, we gain not only valuable critique but also rich creative possibilities for reimagining development and time in primary education in England, but also education as a whole system. This approach encourages us to value development without imposing a single, rigid timeline; to preserve hope without perpetuating exclusionary ideals; to embrace educational structure without controlling children's subjectivity; and to celebrate children's potential without scripting their futures. The challenge taken up in this manifesto is not to discard the legacy of progressive education but to advance its evolution—one informed by hindsight, sharpened through critical reflection and driven by a vision of radical hope.

2.2.5.2 Development Meets Industry: Pestalozzi and Owen

In the wake of Enlightenment ideals and the disruptions of the Industrial Revolution, educational reformers such as Pestalozzi and Owen emerged not merely as theorists but as experimental practitioners. As Armytage (1964) and Cunningham (2005) have shown, both figures sought to counter the harsh, disciplinarian modes of early industrial schooling by reimagining education as a transformative social force—one rooted in the emotional, moral and

intellectual development of the child. While their work must be read critically and historically, this section takes seriously the utopian hope embedded in their projects — not to dismiss their limits, but to ask how such visions might be reinterpreted today in the struggle for more humane, responsive education which is not defined by developmental milestones and timetables.

These two educational reformers offer some significant hope that progressive educational theory can be enacted in schools, countering dominant theories of education. While the contributions of Pestalozzi and Owen represent radical departures from the punitive and utilitarian models of their time, their legacies are neither unproblematic nor wholly unconflicted. Pestalozzi's emphasis on love, domesticity and moral cultivation arguably reinforced certain gendered assumptions (Mellor, 1993), while Owen's controlled environments, though progressive in intent, still rested on a vision of social order shaped by adult authority. Nevertheless, their willingness to experiment institutionally with more humane, child-responsive pedagogies provides a vital counterpoint to dominant narratives of educational development. By foregrounding care, creativity and the child's right to joy and safety, their work continues to inspire critiques of contemporary schooling that remains preoccupied with standardisation based on developmental milestones, surveillance and instrumental outcomes. Rather than idealising their models, this argument draws on their provocations to ask what kinds of schools might emerge if we truly centred children's wellbeing, curiosity and autonomy rather than fixed, linear, developmental standards in the structures and timings of education today?

Pestalozzi was deeply influenced by Rousseau, but more impatient with abstraction. He believed in the innate potential of every child — including the poor (Adams, 1990). While Rousseau's concept of the 'universal child' largely reflected middle-class ideals and concerns, Pestalozzi's vision explicitly embraced children in poverty, advocating education as a means of social uplift for those most in need. As Pestalozzi stated, 'I wish to put the poor child in the same position as the rich child and by doing so, I desire to form men' (cited in Bowen, 1972, p. 54). As Pestalozzi asserted, 'The task of education is to develop the head, the heart and the hands in every child, but it is especially urgent to provide this for the poor, so that they may become fully human and able to improve their condition' (Bowen, 1972, p. 56). This commitment to inclusive education distinguished Pestalozzi's vision from earlier theories focused primarily on the development of middle-class children and underscored his belief in education as a powerful tool for social regeneration. His threefold model offered an early emphasis on the idea of holistic development.

His insistence that affection and security were *foundational* to learning made him a countercultural figure in a time when although there was huge variation in schools across Europe, mainstream schooling often served economic and social discipline. In late 18th- and early 19th-century Switzerland, schooling was serving primarily to maintain existing social hierarchies and prepare children to fulfil predetermined roles within a largely agrarian and emerging industrial society (Gouda, 1975; Reese, 1995). Education was uneven and localised, with many rural and poor children receiving little formal schooling (Bamford, 1998). Where schooling did exist, it tended to be narrowly focused on religious instruction and rote learning, reinforcing obedience and conformity rather than fostering critical thinking or creativity (Löwith, 1956). This system functioned less as a means of personal development and more as an instrument for inculcating the discipline and skills deemed necessary for social order and economic productivity (Heafford, 2016). It was against this backdrop that Pestalozzi's innovative, child-centred approach emerged, challenging the prevailing model by emphasising holistic development of all children (Löwith, 1956; Reese, 1995). His reforms were not without contradiction (Adams, 1990). Though he claimed to follow 'nature', as Rousseau had before him, and insisted on love, security and dignity for the child - nature itself was interpreted through Christian, European, patriarchal frameworks.

> I would take school instruction out of the hands of the old order of decrepit, stammering, journeyman-teachers, as well as from the new weak ones, who are generally no better for popular instruction and entrust it to the eternal powers of nature herself. . . (Pestalozzi, 1894, p. 97).

As demonstrated here in his own words, Pestalozzi aligned with Rousseau, arguing that education should support the natural development of the child (Osberg & Biesta, 2013). He advocated for learning through direct experience and promoted holistic thought focusing on the child's needs (Nelson & Hammerman, 1996). By the 'head' he meant not abstract academic instruction but the cultivation of understanding through sensory experience and gradual intellectual growth. Learning, he argued, must be grounded in '*Anschauung'*—sense-based perception—moving 'from the concrete to the abstract, from the simple to the complex' (Pestalozzi, 1894). The 'heart' referred to moral and emotional development, which Pestalozzi saw as central to a child's becoming a compassionate and socially responsible individual. He believed love and trust were foundational to learning. For him, the power of maternal love must be a guiding principle of education (Heafford, 2016). The 'hands' signified the value of physical and practical activity—manual labour, craft and interaction with the material world—as both educational and character-building. These ideas are discussed by Charkin (2020) in her work exploring Kilquhanity and Summerhill schools. The essential nature of practical and

manual labour education, Pestalozzi insisted, must 'develop the faculties of man: his heart, his mind and his hand' (quoted in Silber, 1965, p. 124). His schools therefore integrated intellectual instruction, emotional care and practical tasks into a unified pedagogy—an approach that challenged the disciplinary and rote-based schooling of his time. His thoughts on physical and practical activities and the arguments put forward enlightening readers about the benefits of such education as children receive Kilquhanity and Summerhill inspires the ideas that children are too often detached from the natural world. We should learn with the land not apart from it and time is demanded to ensure this is possible.

Whether one was rich or poor, rote learning was the basic teaching method. In contrast to prevailing practice, Pestalozzi advocated a familial atmosphere; a large degree of freedom for children to pursue what interests them and to learn at their own individual pace; an emphasis on the concrete and immediate experience rather than on words and concepts. The traditional system Pestalozzi fought against is far different from the current education system, but it is argued here that what we see in most primary classrooms today is not 'familial' enough, does not allow enough freedom for children to pursue what interests them and does not allow them to work at their own pace. Following Rousseau's belief that children are not simply miniature adults, but have their own concerns and feelings and needs, Pestalozzi went far beyond Rousseau in investigating the nature of childhood. He emphasised the critical relationship between mother and child. He formulated the fundamental principle of the child's self-activity in early learning. In line with Rousseau, Pestalozzi was keen for educators not to give ready-made answers, but to encourage children to cultivate their powers of observation, judgement and reason on things spontaneously dictated by their own interest (Adams, 1990, p. 266). While Rousseau emphasised a largely passive role for the teacher, Pestalozzi instead envisioned an affectionate and emotionally responsive guide for children. He maintained that 'the heart is the source of the highest culture' (Pestalozzi, 1894). This was a striking perspective in a period when many children were valued primarily for their economic contribution. In poorer rural households, their labour could be essential to family survival (Humphries, 2010), and the growth of industrialisation often reinforced this economic role by creating a demand for cheap, adaptable child workers (Cunningham, 2005).

Against this backdrop, Pestalozzi's conviction in education's transformative potential for society marked a significant departure from Rousseau, whose focus was on protecting children from the corrupting influence of society. Pestalozzi offered a visionary and poetic account of childhood that imbued it with profound moral and social significance (Herbert, 2004). He portrayed the child as a bearer of innate goodness and purity, embodying the hope for

humanity's future regeneration (Trohler, 2013). Childhood was presented not merely as a stage of development but as a sacred, almost divine state, a 'gift' entrusted to adults for protection and cultivation. This elevated childhood to a moral imperative, placing upon it an enormous burden of expectation as the foundation for a more just and humane society. As Bruce (2000) observes, Pestalozzi's idealisation 'burdens childhood with enormous hope, casting the child as both promise and project of social renewal' (2000, p. 45). While this vision is inspiring in its affirmation of the child's intrinsic value and potential, it also risks imposing significant but important expectations on children and educators, potentially obscuring the social and structural constraints that shape educational realities. It inspires the moral obligation which drives this manifesto. Children need schools to be better but also educators need the system to change so that those of them who see as hooks (1994, p. 13) expresses an 'aspect of our vocation not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth' of their students. Teachers need to be encouraged to be their best and to have the 'courage to transgress those boundaries to respond to pupils' unique needs' (hooks, 1994, p. 203). We need to challenge the banking system (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994). We must continue to strive to reimagine education.

Despite Pestalozzi's significant contributions to educational thought and the moral considerations of educators, his methods have faced several notable criticisms. Primarily, his approach, grounded in close, individualised attention and the natural development of the child limited its influence on mainstream education systems. As Bowen observes, 'Pestalozzi's educational vision, while inspiring, proved difficult to extend beyond small-scale, intimate settings' (Bowen, 1972, p. 132) and Löwith concurs that 'his methods... did not fundamentally transform the Swiss or European educational systems during his lifetime' (Löwith, 1956, p. 110). Critics have also characterised his pedagogy as overly romantic and idealistic, with Schmidt noting that Pestalozzi's 'emphasis on natural development and learning through experience risks neglecting the rigour and discipline necessary for effective schooling' (Schmidt, 1988, p. 77). Biesta adds that this 'pedagogical idealism sometimes seemed to conflict with the pragmatic requirements of institutional education' (Biesta, 2006, p. 55), which were repudiated by Pestalozzi. Furthermore, Pestalozzi's lack of a clear, detailed curriculum framework meant that his principles often remained vague; his work lacked 'a precise and consistent curriculum framework' (Forster, 1992, p. 141), while Miller highlights that this vagueness 'made it challenging to implement his approach systematically' (Miller, 1995, p. 99). Finally, by focusing predominantly on the child's holistic, individual development, Pestalozzi's approach 'sometimes downplays the social and cultural dimensions essential to education' (Biesta, 2010c,

p. 88), potentially isolating the child from broader societal realities and collective educational aims.

Rousseau's *Émile* was conceived as a one-to-one tutoring and child-centred theory of education, making it inherently challenging to adapt for larger educational contexts. Pestalozzi established schools that embodied his holistic vision, yet these institutions remained alternatives rather than replacements to the established schooling system in Switzerland. Their work, while profoundly influential, highlights the difficulties of expanding innovative pedagogical models beyond limited or experimental settings. This tension between ideal educational practice and systemic implementation also characterises the pioneering efforts of Owen, who sought to integrate progressive educational principles on a larger, more sustainable scale. Pestalozzi's ideas on pedagogy and philosophy resonate valuably with the ambitions of the manifesto. They were also a partial inspiration for the reform ideas of Owen, despite his scepticism of Pestalozzi's underlying Christian anthropology (Davis, 2020) Owen offers an instrumental connection between European reform ideas in the history of education and the historical British educational landscape.

Owen represents one of the earliest attempts to apply progressive educational ideals on a wider social scale. At New Lanark, his model industrial community in Scotland, Owen implemented an education system designed not only to serve the children of factory workers but also to foster their moral, intellectual and physical development. Owen declared that 'education is the chief instrument of human happiness' (Humphreys, 1998a, p. 45), highlighting his belief in education as a tool for social transformation. Unlike Rousseau's intimate tutoring (Van Crombrugge, 1995) or Pestalozzi's smaller experimental schools, Owen's approach was integrated within an operational industrial setting, aiming for sustainable, systemic reform. He insisted that 'our schools must prepare children not merely for work, but for life; to cultivate their minds, morals and habits, so as to form good citizens' (Draper, 1889, p. 238). The New Lanark experiment demonstrated that 'it is possible to combine industrial production with the highest standards of education and social welfare' (Humphreys, 1998a, p. 52), providing a powerful model of education. A model scaled beyond elite or isolated contexts and influencing later Victorian social and educational reforms.

At New Lanark, Owen founded what many regard as the first Infant School in Britain. Rejecting rote learning, punishment and early literacy drills, he created an environment rich in song, movement, nature and moral conversation (Curtis & O'Hagan, 2009). His vision was not one of passive innocence but of active childhood as a moral and civic foundation for a better world

(Moss, 2007). Owen's utopianism was both idealistic and deeply practical. He envisioned an education that could break cycles of poverty and oppression without relying on fear or force (Dale, 1993). He even sent his own children to Pestalozzian schools in Switzerland, a sign of his commitment to rethinking education from the ground up. Owen was among the first to create infant schools, reflecting Rousseau's belief in the formative power of early experiences. 'The character of men is formed in early youth and that is the time for forming it well' (Owen, 1857, p. 34). Owen believed that early childhood was the crucial period for shaping character and moral habits through structured, compassionate education. For the most part, Owen adopted the Lockean-Helvetian empiricist view of 'blank slate' character formation (Davis & O'Hagan, 2010). However, Owen's infant schools also responded directly to the socioeconomic realities of his industrial community, where both mothers and fathers laboured long hours in the mills. These schools provided vital childcare, ensuring that young children were cared for in a safe, nurturing environment during working hours. This dual purpose—ideological and practical—reflected Owen's broader commitment to social improvement. The infant schools sought not only to educate but also to alleviate the hardships faced by factory families in the absence of social safety nets beyond the punitive Poor Laws (Donnachie, 2014; Lowe, 2017).

Consequently, Owen's infant schools stand as a distinctive example of early nineteenth-century educational innovation, combining philosophical ideals about childhood development with urgent social needs. Owen's New Lanark School emphasised moral education without punishment. Similar to Rousseau's philosophical thinking, but based on empiricist assumptions, he believed society corrupts children and that education should protect and nurture innate goodness (Gray, 2013). He structured his schools to avoid harsh regimentation, replacing it with activities, games and joyful learning to foster freedom and curiosity. Owen pioneered early forms of experiential learning, e.g., learning through play and exposure to nature, which allowed children to learn by doing. His son, R. D. Owen (1824) highlighted Owen's defining ideas about children being outdoors, which were essential to the New Lanark system. These early considerations regarding the use of outdoor space resonates with many contemporary debates about 'break times' and outdoor learning (Blatchford & Baines, 2006; Pellegrini, 2005) and contributes to the manifesto proposals of encouraging outdoor learning, reclaiming play, wonder and the arts.

In line with Pestalozzi inspired pedagogy, Owen promoted hands-on learning, including dancing, singing and physical activity, believing education should engage the whole child (Davidson, 2010). His paternalistic care of children included music, nature and kindness or affective engagement, nurturing their emotional and sensory responsiveness. Pestalozzi's maternal

model aligned with his holistic educational philosophy, which sought to integrate 'head, heart and hands' through affectionate, personalised attention. In contrast, Owen's approach, shaped by his industrialist background, reflected a more paternalistic and interventionist form of care. While Owen also prioritised the well-being and moral education of children, his model was embedded within a broader institutional framework, with a focus on regulation, discipline and social order within factory communities and infant schools (Humphreys et al, 2016) rather than Christian doctrine. Owen's paternalism implied a top-down responsibility of the factory owner or state towards the workforce's children, reflecting industrial and social control mechanisms as much as benevolent care.

The contrast between Pestalozzi's intimate, familial ideal and Owen's structured, institutional approach highlights differing underlying assumptions about the nature of care and authority in education and raises important questions about how emotional attachment and social regulation coexist in educational practice. Owen's scepticism regarding the nuclear family, which he saw as a maladaptive institution, which corrupted and oppressed children influenced his considerations of educational institutions. Owen believed that with the right environment, children could be shaped into rational, kind, cooperative citizens (Davis, 2003). Owen's work can be seen as part of a broader liberal-humanist and secular tradition that sought to mould the child into a productive social being. Owen believed in freedom from coercion in education and the workplace. He insisted that education and mutual respect could empower workers and their children. He incorporated nature walks and environmental exploration into school life, encouraging natural observation and reflection. The system aimed to cultivate moral character, not just knowledge and the powers of reason. He believed education could shape society itself by improving individuals and liberating their intellectual and creative potential.

At this time, most schools—particularly the limited provision for the working classes—were run by Churches and closely tied to specific denominational doctrines. This often meant that education was not only about literacy and numeracy but also about religious instruction, frequently promoting a narrow set of moral values aligned with a particular church. Owen's secular schools disrupted this monopoly, offering an alternative idea focused on moral and social development without religious dogma. This was radical because it separated education from ecclesiastical control. Owen's schools consciously rejected religious instruction in favour of reason, observation and moral example. He believed that truths must be taught to children without reference to sectarian creeds (Owen, 1991), arguing that moral development should be based on shared human values rather than doctrinal belief. This secularism reflected Enlightenment ideals, including the belief that children could be moulded into rational,

cooperative citizens through carefully structured environments free from superstition or fear. It also made education more inclusive, accessible to children regardless of religious background and positioned schooling as a key tool of social reform rather than religious conversion. As Harrison (1971) notes, Owen's educational experiment ‘was remarkable in its insistence on moral instruction without theology’ (p. 125), marking an early and influential attempt to decouple education from ecclesiastical control. In doing so, Owen not only prefigured later secular schooling movements but also asserted that the improvement of society depended on universal, rational education from the earliest years. While this ideal is inspiring, it also raises important questions: who decides what kind of child we are shaping? What is lost in education systems that still carry echoes of these shaping logics? Owen’s school was not free from regulatory aims; however, it also functioned as an experiment in collective care, reflecting a vision of childhood as worthy of emotional and moral investment, not merely economic utility (Owen, 1991). In this sense, Owen can be reclaimed as a proto-critical pedagogue, whose work prefigures and acts as a theoretical cornerstone to many of the contemporary calls to centre relationships, wellbeing and social justice in education. The manifesto calls for learning to be relational: classrooms and learning spaces should not be containers but encounters.

While Owen’s New Lanark experiment attracted admiration for its progressive vision of social and moral reform, it also elicited critique from contemporaries who questioned the concentration of authority embedded in his model (Simeon, 2025). William Thompson—an early socialist thinker and one-time associate of Owen—objected to what he perceived as Owen’s reliance on charismatic leadership and elite patronage, which he argued undermined democratic principles (Harrison, 1971). Similarly, John Stuart Mill expressed concern that Owen’s model risked eroding individual liberty by placing excessive power in the hands of social planners (Davis & O’Hagan, 2010). Critiques expose a central contradiction in Owen’s legacy: his desire to reshape society through collective reform was matched by a managerial approach that risked replicating the hierarchies it sought to replace. Owen imposed a rigid moral order that functioned to discipline the working class rather than empower them at the beginning, reflecting a top-down imposition of behavioural norms under the guise of benevolent reform. This critique contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by early nineteenth-century educational and social reformers in balancing idealism with the realities of power and governance (Davis & O’Hagan, 2010). Although his views did become much more radical in his later life.

In both Pestalozzi and Owen, we see an imaginative vitality that the structuring of time — daily rhythms, mixed grouping, the length of childhood — could be re-imagined to better serve

children's needs. Pestalozzi designed his pedagogy to follow the child's rhythms rather than impose adult structures. Owen rejected rigid schedules and saw joy, not discipline, as the engine of learning. As later critical theorists remind us, and we restate here for further impact, no structuring of development is ever neutral (Burman, 2008) and 'time' in education is always political (Biesta, 2010a, 2010b). However, this does not mean we must abandon these early visions. Instead, their work invites us to hold both promise and critique together: to see in their schools a kind of imperfect utopia, whose contradictions are precisely what make them so generative for rethinking education with caution today. Marx and Engels acknowledged the pioneering contributions of Pestalozzi and Owen to education and social reform but criticised their approaches as fundamentally limited by bourgeois ideology and naïve idealism. While Pestalozzi's commitment to holistic education marked a significant pedagogical advance, Engels viewed it as a form of petty-bourgeois humanism that failed to confront the structural inequalities produced by capitalism itself (Engels, 1970, p. 32). This critique anticipates later Marxist humanist interventions. Hudis (2018, 2023) extending Marxism beyond economistic reductionism, argues that racism is not an ideological residue or historical accident but is structurally embedded within capitalist social relations. From this perspective, education systems do not merely *reflect* inequality through biased practice; they actively *reproduce racialised hierarchies* as part of capitalism's social logic, unless their structural foundations are fundamentally transformed.

Pestalozzi's pedagogy embodied a fideism, relying on moral and religious faith as the basis for social progress rather than a materialist analysis of economic conditions. Engels regarded this as an idealist trust in virtue detached from the realities of class oppression and struggle. Marx and Engels further critiqued Pestalozzi for what they termed an elite utopianism, whereby social transformation was imagined through the moral and intellectual uplift of individuals—often from a middle-class perspective—without challenging the systemic exploitation inherent in capitalism (Marx & Engels, 1969). Similarly, Owen's utopian socialism and belief in the 'right environment' which could shape rational, cooperative citizens - was critiqued by Marx and Engels for neglecting the necessity of revolutionary change. Engels dismissed Owen's attempts as they did not challenge the capitalist mode of production (Davis & O'Hagan, 2010), while Marx emphasised that true social transformation required the overthrow of capitalist social relations, not mere reformist experiments. Thus, although Pestalozzi and Owen laid important groundwork, Marx and Engels argued that their educational and social visions were insufficiently radical to bring about genuine emancipation from capitalist exploitation. Hudis (2023) deepens and corrects earlier Marxist limits claiming that education cannot be emancipatory without structural change.

The contributions of Pestalozzi and Owen, with critique acknowledged, placed alongside the work of Froebel, collectively challenge dominant models of education that frame childhood as a mere preparatory stage for adulthood. These reformers advanced ideas of developmental time that resist the pressures of standardisation, acceleration and early academicisation that characterise contemporary primary schooling. Pestalozzi called for an affectionate, sensory and holistic approach, rooted in the belief that children develop through self-activity rather than passive reception. Owen echoed these principles in his structured but joyful environments that privileged health, nature and moral wellbeing over early academic training. Froebel, building on both men's work, further cemented the idea that *play* is not a trivial pastime but a serious and essential mode of learning. His invention of the kindergarten formalised time for young children to explore, create and make sense of the world on their own terms. Froebel described play as the highest expression of human development (Froebel, 2005), suggesting a radical shift in how educational time might be structured—not around efficiency or progression but around freedom, rhythm and wonder. Together, these thinkers offer an alternative conceptualisation of developmental time: one that honours the present tense of childhood, values the process over the product and grants learners the temporal space to grow according to their own rhythms. While each figure's work carries its own limitations and historical biases, they provide important starting points for reimagining time in schools—not as a conveyor belt towards standardised adulthood, but as an unfolding process marked by care, curiosity and creativity.

2.2.5.3 Froebel and the Spiritualised Development of the Child

Following the reformist experiments of Pestalozzi and Owen, Froebel emerged in the early 19th century as one of the most influential and poetic visionaries of early childhood education. Froebel, like Pestalozzi, brought a deeply spiritual and metaphysical framework to the child's developmental journey. As Kennedy (2016) observes, Froebel's conception of the child aligns with what he terms the 'oracular child'—a figure who embodies intuitive moral and philosophical insight and whose development is seen not merely as socialisation but as the unfolding of universal, even divine and transcendent, truth. Education, for Froebel, was not merely about cognition or behaviour; it was a profound act of nurturing the child's inner essence and connecting them with the divine order of the world. Froebel's work deserves attention not only because of its historical influence, but because it yet again offers a language of care, as emphasised by Pestalozzi and Owen, reverence and relationality that continues to inspire contemporary movements seeking to resist overly technical and outcomes-driven

approaches to early education. His refrain come let us live with our children demonstrates his design for education (Froebel, 2005).

Froebel's emphasis on rhythm, harmony and inner development continues to resonate in educational philosophies such as Early Years education, Steiner education, Reggio Emilia and aspects of Montessori. His work invites today's educators to pause the rush toward outcomes and reclaim time for wonder, contemplation and slow growth as was Rousseau's desire. His language of unity — between child, world and self — offers a recreative counterpoint to fragmented, compartmentalised learning systems. This section contrasts Froebel's concept of self-activity and harmony with nature, seen as a spiritual unfolding, with Pestalozzi's more material and relational approach to education. It explores the implications of understanding child development as innate, universal and transcendent and connects these ideas to curriculum design, particularly through Froebel's educational *gifts* which are both open-ended and subtly normative.

Froebel's most enduring metaphor is that of the child as a seed, with innate potential waiting to unfold through self-directed activity. Unlike some of his Enlightenment predecessors, Froebel's concept of development was not simply linear or biological, but *spiritual* and *relational*. He was heavily influenced by European Romantic critiques of Enlightenment rationality and instrumentalism. He believed that the child's inner nature expressed itself through play, movement and connection with nature and that the educator's role was to guide — not command — this process. 'Education must be passive and protective, not prescriptive or interfering' (Froebel, 2005, p. 9). His theory of self-activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) placed the child at the centre of learning, not as a vessel to be filled but as an active participant in a cosmic harmony. The *gifts* and '*occupations'* were not just teaching tools but symbolic invitations for children to explore patterns, relationships and meaning — a profound challenge to industrial-era schooling focused on obedience and repetition. In the manifesto, we propose to let the children lead and to trust them.

There is much to admire in Froebel's work: a view of the child as worthy of time, reverence and symbolic depth; an early appreciation for learning through play and creativity; and a commitment to seeing childhood as a valuable stage in its own right, not merely preparation for adulthood. In this sense, Froebel can be seen as a spiritual-utopian thinker who sought to design educational environments where children could become fully themselves. However, as scholars such as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) and Burman (2008) remind us, even such progressive ideals can carry hidden assumptions. His vision of harmony sometimes veiled a

quiet normalisation: a subtle regulation of how children ought to develop and what 'right development' looked like.

> The boy has not become a boy, nor has the youth become a youth, by reaching a certain age, but only by having lived through childhood and, further on, through boyhood, true to the requirements of his mind, his feelings and his body; similarly, adult man has not become an adult man by reaching a certain age, but only by faithfully satisfying the requirements of his childhood, boyhood and youth. (Froebel, 1887/2005).

As Bruce (2012) notes, Froebel's model of learning risked becoming rigid over time, particularly as his gifts were routinised in teacher training. What began as open-ended exploration could, in less thoughtful hands, turn into developmental prescription — an echo of the tensions already noted in Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Owen's work.

While both Pestalozzi and Owen laid important foundations for alternative educational visions—emphasising care, moral development and the social purpose of education—their models proved difficult to scale beyond their immediate contexts. Pestalozzi's schools remained small and ideologically driven, while Owen's infant school at New Lanark, though innovative, was closely tied to his own resources and management. In contrast, Froebel's kindergarten movement achieved far greater international reach, particularly in the field of early years education. His emphasis on structured play, creativity and holistic development aligned with growing interest in early childhood as a distinct and important stage of life. Bruce (2012) notes, Froebel's ideas were widely taken up in the training of early childhood educators, supported by a network of Froebel Societies and dedicated teacher training institutions. Froebel's success in the Early Years sector was also supported by philanthropic and religious reformers, particularly women, who saw kindergartens as a means of social improvement and female career opportunity (Ailwood, 2008; Quon, Nichols & Tan, 2025). His ideas were seen as both progressive and practical, offering a clear pedagogical model that was well suited to younger children. However, his influence did not extend as strongly into mainstream compulsory education. As national systems of schooling became more centralised and standardised in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, priorities shifted toward formal instruction, discipline and measurable outcomes (Davis, 2010). Froebel's developmental and spiritual approach proved difficult to adapt to such systems. Barblett et al. (2016) argue, compulsory schooling increasingly emphasises outcomes over processes, marginalising more holistic educational philosophies. In line with Morrison (2019) this manifesto proposes holistic philosophies should not be moved to the margins but should be central to mainstream education.

When Froebel was developing his educational philosophy in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the dominant model of education in Germany—particularly in Prussia—was one of increasing standardisation, discipline and state control. Public education reforms, inspired by Enlightenment rationalism and the needs of the emerging bureaucratic state, prioritised obedience, moral instruction and religious conformity, particularly in primary schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As noted previously, formal learning was often based on rote memorisation and classrooms were teacher-centred, leaving little room for individual development or creativity. There was, moreover, no institutionalised provision for children below the age of six; early years education was seen as the responsibility of mothers and family, with no formal structure or pedagogical intent (Bruce, 2012). In this context, Froebel's vision of the Kindergarten—literally, a 'garden for children'—represented a radical departure. By advocating structured learning through play, self-activity and creative expression, Froebel rejected the didacticism and authoritarianism of contemporary schooling in favour of a more child-centred and needs-based approach (Allen & Cowdery, 2006). His commitment to nurturing the 'inner life' of the child (Froebel, 2005) stood in stark contrast to the prevailing educational ethos of the time. As Liebschner (1992, p. 47) notes, 'Froebel's ideas stood in contrast to the dominant authoritarian view of the child prevalent in state education' and were seen by many contemporaries as both subversive and utopian. The Prussian government's 1851 ban on kindergartens—accusing them of fostering atheistic and socialist tendencies—reveals the degree to which Froebel's model was viewed as politically and culturally threatening, despite its spiritual and philosophical underpinnings. This ban proved counterproductive as it propelled Froebelian methods through the immigration of women, especially to the United States, who were trained in his approaches (Ailwood, 2008).

Froebel's vision serves as fertile tension between utopian aspiration and the risks of idealisation. Froebel helps us ask: What does it mean to see the child not as a project to complete, but as already whole, already meaningful? How can today's pedagogies draw from Froebel's reverence for process, without reinscribing essentialist or universalising ideals? The manifesto grounds itself in the belief that learning should begin with the child's own interests, needs and natural development as we have seen in the philosophy of these thinkers. Like Froebel's vision, the vision which drives the manifesto is one which sees the child as inherently active, curious and expressive. The hope for the future is that instead of a rigid, externally imposed curriculum, a flexible and responsive curriculum which grows from children's experiences and interests will stop the teaching of abstract concepts in isolation. This will be considered further in section 2.3.

Dewey's educational philosophy engaged critically with the Romantic and idealist tradition of child-centred education, offering the most sustained critique of Froebel's work. While Dewey acknowledged Froebel's contribution to early childhood education, he criticised the symbolic and metaphysical structure of his pedagogy, particularly the use of *gifts* and fixed activities that imposed adult-defined meanings on children's experiences. He rejected the emphasis on the family, particularly in relation to the needs of an immigrant society, such as the United States of America (Davis, 2010). As Dewey put it, 'Instead of starting with the child and his needs and capacities, Froebel started with the idea of a system, a complete logical system and then tried to adjust the child to that system' (Dewey, 2004, p. 7). Dewey held a more sympathetic view of Pestalozzi, valuing his emphasis on holistic development but warned against the mechanisation of his pedagogical methods when misapplied by followers. Across these engagements, Dewey consistently championed a pedagogy grounded in lived experience, social context and the emergent capacities of the learner, as opposed to fixed developmental schemas or abstract educational ideals. Dewey's texts show admiration for Piaget's empirical work and for taking children's cognition seriously. 'Piaget's work is an exceedingly important contribution to our understanding of how the child's mind works... It is the first work in the field since Baldwin which is not content to regard the child's mind as merely a miniature adult mind', — Preface to Piaget's *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1926).

2.2.5.4 Scientific Developmentalism: Piaget

Despite their diversity, as previously discussed, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel fundamentally rejected the idea that childhood represents a mere deficiency to be overcome in the journey toward rational adulthood. Instead, they understood childhood as a unique and invaluable phase of human development, one that demands educational methods attuned to its particular rhythms and capacities. Rousseau asserted that education should unfold according to the natural timetable of the child rather than adult expectations. Pestalozzi's holistic pedagogy reflected his conviction that intellectual and moral growth arise from the child's concrete experiences and emotional life (Herbert, 2004; Trohler, 2013). Froebel likewise conceived early childhood as a sacred stage, advocating for learning through play, nature and self-activity that honours the child's innate potential (Knight, 2013; Kennedy, 2016). Piaget's work shares this respect for childhood as a qualitatively distinct form of cognition, departing from views that treat children's thinking as simply deficient adult logic (Dewey, 2004; Piaget, 1952). Dewey praised Piaget's systematic study of children's reasoning as a legitimate and coherent mode of

thought (Dewey, 2004; Miller, 2011). However, Piaget's stage theory has been subject to extensive critique for its universalising claims and rigid age-based categorisations, which have been argued to limit recognition of cultural, social and individual variability in development (James & Prout, 1997; Rogoff, 2003) Such developmental normativity has also been criticised more broadly for shaping educational expectations and assessment regimes that privilege linear progression over subjectivity and emergence (Biesta, 2010c).

Piaget occupies a central position in the history of developmental psychology and education and also in the critique of the current primary school education system in England. His work, grounded in decades of close observation of children's thinking, helped shift attention away from what children could not yet do and toward how they made meaning (Mayer, 2008). Piaget's theory of cognitive development—most notably his four-stage model (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational)—has had an enormous and enduring impact on education systems, curriculum design, teacher training and classroom organisation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Elkind, 2007; Santrock, 2018). This framework has shaped how educators understand the progression of children's thinking and has underpinned age-based curricula worldwide (Biesta, 2010b). Piaget's concept of schemas and the twin processes of assimilation and accommodation portrayed the child as an autonomous agent constructing understanding through stages of increasing complexity. There is something radical in this image. As Egan (2002) points out, Piaget's theory insisted that children think differently from adults—not worse, but differently. This reframing invited teachers to respect the child's perspective, to meet them where they were and to see learning as an unfolding and interpersonal process, not a filling-up of knowledge. This developmental vision supported child-centred learning environments: the classroom as a laboratory for exploration, rather than a hall for instruction. It supported open-ended inquiry and learning through concrete experience—especially in the early years.

His legacy is powerful (Burman, 2015). For many educators seeking to defend children's rights to explore, play and construct knowledge actively, Piaget was a liberator. He provided a research-based challenge to didactic, rote-based schooling and reinforced the value of child-centred pedagogy (Dewey, 1997a). But his legacy also reveals the deep entanglement between science, normativity and schooling and raises critical questions about how the language of development came to regulate as much as it enabled. Piaget's enduring influence on mainstream education is closely linked to the empirical nature of his work. Unlike earlier educational thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, or Froebel—whose pedagogical ideals were grounded in philosophical reflection and direct experience—Piaget's theories emerged from

systematic, longitudinal research with children, which provided a structured, scientific account of cognitive development. His model offered a developmental framework that was trusted and unfortunately for the current system of education was easily translatable into age-based curricula and assessment systems (Santrock, 2018).

This scalability and apparent objectivity aligned well with 20th-century efforts to rationalise and standardise schooling through measurable outcomes (Biesta, 2010b). In contrast, educational models inspired by Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel resist this kind of systematisation. They emphasise a more holistic, child-led approach rooted in freedom, emotion and lived experience—what Biesta (2017) terms *subjectification* as a core purpose of education. This presents a critical tension. The aim of this thesis is to propose an up-scalable reimagining of education grounded in these traditions. The challenge lies in articulating a coherent pedagogical framework that does not rely on prescriptive curricula or assessment regimes. The task is not to mimic Piaget's structural rigour, but rather to reconceptualise what constitutes a viable, trustworthy structure in education—one that supports local responsiveness, values children's interests and promotes human flourishing without succumbing to measurement-driven logic.

Yet it is precisely Piaget's success—his widespread adoption—that makes his work an inspiration but also such a crucial site for critique. In the move from theory to policy and classroom implementation, Piaget's stages were often translated into rigid age-based expectations, sometimes ignoring the fluidity, cultural variation and individuality of real children's lives. Walkerdine (1984) powerfully argues that developmental psychology, despite its scientific pretensions, becomes a discourse of governance—a way of identifying 'normal' and 'abnormal' children. Under the guise of neutrality, Piaget's work contributed to a universalising model of the child, assumed to develop through invariant stages in a predictable sequence. This model often reflected Western, middle-class norms, obscuring cultural, linguistic, neurodiverse and socio-political differences. It rendered deviation from the norm not as a difference, but as a delay or deficit. Beauvais (2016) argues that early twentieth-century child psychology did not simply standardise childhood into fixed stages, as is often assumed. Instead, it multiplied the meanings of age, producing overlapping, sometimes contradictory ways of understanding children. She showed that psychologists increasingly spoke of different kinds of age, but that this narrowed definitions of normal, increased the likelihood of children being labelled as atypical and made comparison central to educational judgement. Paradoxically, children were increasingly seen as unique developmental cases yet simultaneously judged against normative developmental benchmarks. Gilborn and Delahunty (2025) contend further that contemporary

educational policy is increasingly shaped by a 'psychological complex' that continues to individualise social and educational problems.

Burman (2008) and Cannella (1997) show how developmental psychology, in its institutionalised form, obscured the power relations embedded in education. 'Developmentalism… does not merely describe the child: it produces the child as an object of intervention and control' (Burman, 2008, p. 6). Age-stage thinking is used to justify sorting, streaming, assessing and excluding children. The flexibility of Piaget's original insights became instrumentalised: used to define when a child is 'ready' for abstract reasoning, literacy, or numeracy and when they are not. Masschelein and Simons (2013) explore how this teleological orientation produces what they describe as an 'anxiety of incompletion'. In developmentalist discourse, children are never fully sufficient as they are; they are always in the process of acquiring, growing, catching up. This creates what might be termed a *temporal hierarchy* of personhood, in which adulthood is the norm and the child is perpetually measured against what they are not yet. The problem is not simply that children are seen as learners—that is inevitable—but that their identities and rights are conditional on their alignment with normative timelines of development.

Such critiques resonate with wider post-structuralist concerns about the regulation of bodies, minds and temporalities in institutional settings like schools. By tying educational legitimacy to narrowly defined and universalised stages of development, these frameworks risk pathologising difference, denying cultural and contextual variation and undermining children's own capacities for self-direction and agency. As Burman (2008) also highlights, developmental psychology often universalises middle-class, Western child-rearing norms as natural, thus marginalising those who do not fit its assumptions. In this context, the critique here of developmentalism is not a rejection of growth or learning itself, but a challenge to the ways in which growth is constructed as *linear, measurable and teleological*. The worry is that these narratives can restrict children's experiences and voices, reinforcing age-stage straightjackets that limit rather than liberate. The manifesto proposes that categorising learning by age standardises difference, supresses potential and distorts the deeply individual nature of becoming.

While Piaget's theory of cognitive development became foundational in the design of 20th-century education systems—structuring curricula, assessment and classroom organisation around a fixed sequence of developmental stages—as later commentators have noted, his later work reveals a more nuanced position that has often been overlooked (Donaldson, 1978; Lourenco & Machado, 1996). Piaget's early-stage theory was embraced as a universal and

biologically determined framework, offering a seemingly scientific basis for age-based schooling and justifying highly standardised approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. However, in his later collaborations with Inhelder and in interviews such as those collected by Bringuier (1980), Piaget acknowledged that development is neither uniform nor inevitable and is profoundly influenced by environmental and social factors. He conceded that 'schooling and social context play important roles' in cognitive growth (Piaget, in Bringuier, 1980, pp. 41-42) and that 'formal operations are neither universal nor automatic' (Piaget & Inhelder, 1973, pp. 106-108). These reflections reveal his growing ambivalence towards the rigidity with which his theories were being applied in education. Ironically, as psychological developmentalism became institutionalised in curricula and assessments, it lost the openness and adaptability that Piaget later endorsed. Piaget's work is rightly critiqued for its universalism and its unintended role in standardising education, but there is still generative value in his commitment to seeing the child as a sense-maker and in resisting the reduction of children to passive receivers of adult knowledge. Piaget's emphasis on the child's agency, curiosity and structuring of their world opens space for rethinking what kinds of pedagogical and temporal flexibility might honour children's diverse trajectories.

The task, then, is not to dismiss Piaget, but to de-centre and re-situate his influence. His model remains one of the most powerful illustrations of how a scientific paradigm—once translated into educational practice—can simultaneously enable and constrain. In keeping with the broader argument of this chapter, Piaget's legacy offers a case study in how *developmental time* became institutionalised: measured, benchmarked and weaponised often in the name of protecting the child. Building on these historic and theoretical perspectives that critique rigid developmentalism, it is crucial to turn attention to the material organisation of time within contemporary schooling (Giroux, 2011). While progressive thinkers have long emphasised the importance of pacing education in tune with children's natural growth and interests, modern school systems frequently impose fixed schedules—standardised terms, uniform start and finish times and strict expectations of punctuality—that can run counter to these ideals. These temporal structures do more than organise the school day; they shape children's daily experiences, regulate their bodies and behaviours and reinforce particular social norms about discipline and productivity. Exploring the regulation of school time thus reveals a further dimension of how developmental concepts are enacted, contested and experienced in practice, opening important questions about whose needs and rhythms education serves—and whose it suppresses.

In the early twentieth century, Dewey and Vygotsky further reoriented educational time. Dewey framed learning as a social, inquiry-driven process — a movement through experience, not content (Cremin, 1959). Vygotsky famously reversed the causal relationship between learning and development, suggesting that social interaction, not biological age, drives cognitive growth. His concept of the *zone of proximal development* subverts rigid chronological frameworks and calls for responsive, collaborative time: a temporality of encounter rather than measurement. This tradition was embodied in practice by educators such as Montessori and Steiner. Montessori classrooms were deliberately mixed age, promoting autonomy, peer learning and a pace attuned to the individual's readiness. Her concept of 'sensitive periods' recognised time as cyclical and affective rather than linear and standardised. Steiner's Waldorf model likewise emphasised rhythm, imagination and holistic development, rejecting the mechanisation of the child. Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, insisted that time must be fluid and negotiated — not imposed from above but co-constructed by children, teachers and materials in dialogue. Learning, for Malaguzzi, was not the accumulation of age-appropriate skills but a choreography of attention, wonder and expression (Malaguzzi, 1994). His commitment to the 'hundred languages of children' demands a temporal ethic - one in which children are given the time to speak, to explore, to return and to revise.

Thus, we come to propose in this manifesto the refusal of the oppressiveness of age categorisation. Not in order to dissolve care but to reframe it — to honour each learner's tempo, emergence and difference. And equally we stress the need for time in learning. Not merely more minutes in the day, but a transformation of educational temporality: one that values lingering, revisiting, digression and interruption. One that acknowledges, as the slow, unpredictable ways in which human beings become (Greene, 2007). We are not calling for the abolition of developmental attentiveness, but for its radical reimagining. A pedagogy of time that is situated, ethical and multiple. A system where time is not a conveyor belt, but a landscape — uneven, storied and full of possibility. These propositions resist the violence of uniform progression and call for a re-enchantment of learning. Where time is not something to be beaten, but something to be lived.

2.2.5.5 Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky

In line with the idea of reclaiming time as a relational and emergent concept in education, Montessori's flexible pacing and mixed-age classrooms, Vygotsky's dynamic and socially situated understanding of development and Reggio Emilia's emphasis on co-constructed

temporalities and a pedagogy of delay offer inspiration. Together, these approaches resist dominant notions of speed, productivity and hierarchical scheduling in learning time. In contrast to the rigid, age-staged and norm-driven models that became embedded in much 20th-century education policy, figures such as Montessori, Vygotsky and Malaguzzi offer radically different visions of childhood, time and learning. Each, in their own way, resists the dominant idea of development as a universal, measurable trajectory toward adult competence. Montessori called the dominant systems of education 'repressive' and 'unnatural'. She stated that 'the child is both a hope and a promise for mankind' (Montessori, 1924). Instead, they open up space for a more relational, contextual and imaginative pedagogy—one that remains deeply inspiring to those seeking more equitable and humane alternatives to mainstream schooling (Sablić, Mirosavljević & Bogatić, 2025).

Montessori's revolutionary model of education, shaped initially through her work with disabled and poor children in Rome, proposed an approach built around deep respect for the child's autonomy and timing. In Montessori classrooms, children move through prepared environments at their own pace, choosing tasks that align with their interests and developmental readiness. 'School must give the child-spirit its charter, and room for expansion' (Montessori, 1924, p. 28). Rather than being sorted and measured against uniform timelines, children are trusted to engage with learning as a self-regulating process. This philosophy directly contests the logic of standardised age-stage curricula. Montessori education is based on mixed-age groupings, removing the artificial segmentation of children by birth year. This breaks down normative comparisons and enables peer learning across developmental levels (Lillard, 2005). Her ideas continue to provide an example of how a pedagogy can affirm the agency and capability of the child without relying on the apparatus of testing, benchmarking, or linear progress. While critiques of Montessori often highlight her early alignment with positivist science and a tendency toward order and discipline, recent re-readings emphasise the utopian and political nature of her work: 'a radical vision of peace, freedom and social reform' grounded in childhood (Lillard, 2005, p. 5). Here, time becomes a space for becoming, not a schedule to be managed.

The educational project in Reggio Emilia, initiated by parents and teachers in post-World War II Northern Italy and deeply shaped by Malaguzzi, offers one of the most sustained and profound challenges to developmentalism in its institutionalised form. Malaguzzi refused the idea of the child as incomplete or not-yet. Instead, Malaguzzi spoke of children as 'rich, powerful, competent and full of potential' (Malaguzzi, 1994, p.45). Learning in Reggio Emilia schools is project-based, inquiry-driven and open-ended, often emerging from children's questions and

sustained over weeks or months. The curriculum does not follow a set sequence of skills to master, but unfolds in dialogue with the child's interests, the environment and the collective imagination of the group. Crucially, time in Reggio Emilia schools is not broken into rigid blocks or governed by a clock. It is treated as relational and aesthetic. Documentation—photos, transcripts, artefacts—serves not to measure but to narrate, to reflect and to honour learning as lived experience. Malaguzzi insisted that 'time is not a neutral container'—it shapes what is possible in pedagogy and what is foreclosed. 'We need to value the time of childhood as different, not as preparation, not as a waiting room for adulthood, but as full of meaning in itself' (Malaguzzi, cited in Rinaldi, 2006, p. 128). Reggio's approach invites educators to rethink what counts as progress and to resist speed and acceleration in favour of *slowness, multiplicity and presence*.

Each of these educational traditions offers alternative visions of time, learning and development. Though very different in style and emphasis, they share a refusal of development-as-destiny. They instead invite us to imagine education as a space of encounter, emergence and co-creation, not simply of preparation or measurement. These approaches are not without limits. They have been critiqued for romanticising the child, for lacking systemic political critique, or for being difficult to scale. Yet they remain vital sources of pedagogical hope, showing that schooling can be otherwise. In a time of standardised assessment, school readiness testing and developmental surveillance, these models remind us that temporal imagination matters. The future of education depends on how we conceptualise time, development and the child's unfolding place within both.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning introduced a crucial shift in how development was understood. His concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) challenged Piagetian individualism by asserting that learning leads development, not the other way around. With appropriate support—what we now call *scaffolding*—children can exceed their apparent developmental stage. This has profound implications for how time is conceptualised in education. Vygotsky decentres developmental delay as deficit and instead asks: what kinds of interaction, language, tools and relationships does the child have access to? Development is no longer fixed but co-constructed in time with others. Vygotsky's model has been widely taken up in progressive pedagogy but also instrumentalised in neoliberal systems to justify certain interventions and assessments. Yet his core insight—that children's meaning-making is situated and dynamic—remains a crucial corrective to standardised approaches. As cultural theorists like Rogoff (2003) argue, development must be read within the practices, expectations and values

of specific communities. Time becomes plural, contingent and multiple—not universal or teleological.

In Montessori settings, classrooms are designed to support uninterrupted work periods and freedom of movement, reflecting a child-centred philosophy that values autonomy and concentration (Lillard, 2005). Montessori training emphasises the role of the teacher as a guide, facilitating self-directed learning through the use of self-correcting materials and carefully prepared environments (Cossentino, 2006; Humphreys, 1998b). The concept of 'freedom within limits' is central: while children are encouraged to make independent choices and move freely, this freedom is bounded by their capacity for responsibility. As Kylie (2020) notes, the environment offers structured freedom—safe and intentional, rather than unregulated or chaotic. Reggio Emilia, meanwhile, champions an emergent, project-based curriculum where time is deliberately flexible and responsive to children's interests. The learning environment, including the outdoor space conceived as a 'third teacher' is designed to provoke inquiry, creativity and collaboration (Edwards, 2002; Alijabreen, 2020; Fisher & Frey, 2022). Reggio Emilia approaches time as emergent, collaborative and multiple rather than fixed in advance (Rinaldi, 2006). Similarly, democratic schools like Summerhill often reject fixed timetables, allowing students to self-regulate both their time and learning. Additionally, some Alternative Provision (AP) and home education settings accommodate lateness, varying paces and nonlinear engagement using person-centred planning (Gray, Woods & Nuttall, 2022) in ways that mainstream schools typically penalise.

These alternatives function as constructive provocations — showing that school time can be reimagined. If time in mainstream schooling is often structured according to predetermined logics — segmented, linear and hierarchical — a progressive, emancipatory vision of education must grapple with how these logics might be disrupted. The goal is not simply to reform the school day but to rethink the very ontology of educational time: whose rhythms it follows, what it values and how it reflects a politics of possibility. Forest School approaches extend this commitment to autonomy and experiential learning still further through sustained outdoor sessions. These sessions prioritise exploration, unstructured play and managed risk-taking, fostering resilience, confidence and adaptability in natural environments (Knight, 2013).

In England, The Plowden Report, in 1967 offered teachers a set of practical, pedagogical recommendations grounded in a particular understanding of *development and time* in the primary classroom. Plowden urged teachers to recognise that children develop at different rates and along uneven pathways, and therefore to abandon rigid pacing, uniform lesson timing,

and whole-class progression as the default mode of teaching (Gillard, 2018). Instead, teachers were encouraged to organise classrooms so that children could spend longer on ideas, revisit concepts and move forward when they were *ready*, rather than when the timetable dictated. This translated into support for flexible grouping, extended periods of activity-based work, and integrated projects rather than tightly segmented lessons. Time was to be treated as a resource for learning, not merely a scheduling constraint.

Plowden also recommended that teachers attend closely to children's social, emotional and cognitive development together, arguing that learning could not be rushed without damaging motivation and self-confidence. Observation and professional judgement were positioned as central teacher responsibilities: teachers should watch how children learn, diagnose emerging understanding, and adjust the tempo and structure of activities accordingly. In theoretical terms, Plowden's recommendations aligned closely with Dewey's view of learning as a continuity of experience, where educational time should grow organically from children's activity rather than be imposed in advance. They also resonate with Vygotsky's emphasis on development as socially mediated: allowing children time to work collaboratively, talk, and receive guidance creates opportunities for learning within the zone of proximal development rather than assuming readiness is purely maturational. Plowden departed from Rousseau's more protectionist notion of natural development unfolding in isolation; although it valued discovery, it firmly situated development within the social time of the classroom, shaped by interaction, dialogue and teacher judgement.

The use of 'discovery learning'—an approach grounded in the belief that learners understand concepts most effectively when they explore and uncover them independently—has been a hallmark of many alternative educational models. It enhances both teacher and pupil agency by allowing learning to emerge from inquiry rather than prescription. However, this approach has faced substantial critique. Scholars argue that insufficient direct instruction can lead to confusion and hinder concept mastery (Clark, Kirschner & Sweller, 2012). Without appropriate scaffolding, learners may become overwhelmed or fail to consolidate knowledge, leading to misconceptions or partial understandings (Chen, Kalyuga & Sweller, 2016; Mayer, 2004; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). Problem solving and a dynamic interplay between guidance, environment and the learner's own active engagement can offer a more nuanced model rather than the binary of direct teaching versus unguided discovery allows. A practical concern frequently raised within time-constrained education systems is the inefficiency of discovery learning: it can be slow and resource-intensive, as pupils require extended periods to explore, experiment and arrive at conceptual understanding. In Montessori classrooms, for instance, a

lesson does not begin until the child has independently unrolled a mat and prepared their learning space—an act that signals readiness and commands respect for the learner's autonomy. While this ritual underscores the child-centred ethos of the pedagogy, critics may argue that such procedures consume valuable instructional time (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006; Mayer, 2004).

The contrast between discovery-oriented pedagogy and time-pressured mainstream education is further reflected in the differing approaches between the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) in England (Ruscoe, Barblett & Barratt-Pugh, 2023). EYFS is underpinned by principles of play-based, active learning, where practitioners are trained to create enabling environments—spaces carefully curated to support exploration, autonomy and sustained engagement (Early Excellence, 2023). In contrast, KS1 training typically centres on delivering a prescribed curriculum, with reduced emphasis on play and exploration. The learning environment becomes more standardised, often structured around tight timetables and fixed lesson formats, which can constrain children's agency and curtail opportunities for self-directed inquiry even if policy endorses play (such is the case in Northern Ireland, Hunter & Walsh, 2014).

Freeman (2010) argues that when viewed together, the temporal structures — the timetable, school calendar, lesson length, break time and starting age — amount to a *chronopolitics* of schooling. This temporal regime often marginalises those whose rhythms, needs or backgrounds do not conform to its linear, age-based progression. Drawing on scholars such as Walkerdine, Burman and Gidley (2007) and Freeman (2010), we can begin to conceptualise time as flexible, relational and responsive — shaped by children's lived experiences rather than imposed upon them. In such a vision, the boundaries between learning and non-learning blur; time becomes something co-constructed, allowing for rest, care, autonomy and agency alongside instruction.

Experimental schools in countries such as Finland (Sahlberg, 2007) and parts of Canada (such as Toronto's Eastern Commerce Collegiate, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) have begun to trial flexible school calendars, where terms are broken into shorter modules, interspersed with regular rest and reflection periods. These models often emerge from holistic or trauma-informed pedagogies that recognise that children's capacity to learn is not uniform or constant. Rather than setting fixed holidays — which often exacerbate inequality due to differential access to enriching activities (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2020) — modular breaks could be distributed more equitably, allow for community-defined calendars and reflect local cultural, seasonal and familial needs. Indigenous education initiatives have modelled this, aligning time

structures with land-based cycles and intergenerational care responsibilities (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). In democratic schools such as Summerhill or Agora Schools in the Netherlands and Belgium, students co-create their daily and weekly timetables, including when and whether to take breaks. Time becomes a collective resource negotiated among equals, rather than a disciplinary device imposed from above. These models resist the hidden curriculum of punctuality-as-virtue, instead promoting responsibility through genuine choice. Such approaches resonate with poststructuralist critiques of authority and fixed meaning (Foucault, 1977; Lather, 2007). They also affirm utopian and decolonial approaches to temporality, which view time not as neutral but as deeply tied to histories of control, productivity and exclusion (Shahjahan, 2015).

Development and time can be seen as open-ended, recursive and experiential (Rinaldi, 2006). Documentation, reflection and aesthetic engagement replace timetables in Reggio Emilia. 'Breaks' become integral to the process of noticing, making meaning and sustaining relational attention. In this vision, learning does not follow the tick of a clock but the ebb and flow of dialogue, wonder and shared attention. This demands that we relinquish narrow accountability regimes and instead embrace time as pedagogy: slow, ethical, unfinished. There is a need for speculative educational design — what Walkerdine, Burman and Gidley (2007) conceptualise as pedagogies of possibility. This analysis reinforces the chapter's broader claim: that educational time, like development, is not a neutral or natural phenomenon, but a terrain of ideological struggle. The structures of the school day — whom they serve, whom they disadvantage, how they shape experiences of learning — must be foregrounded in any attempt to reimagine progressive primary education. Challenging these structures opens space for multiplicity and resistance, for learning that unfolds in diverse rhythms.

As this section draws to a close, it is vital to synthesise the insights gained on developmentalism and temporal organisation—recognising which elements remain valuable and which must be critically set aside. Moving forward, we advocate for reimagining 'educational time' as slower, cyclical and collectively experienced, challenging the rigid authority of the clock and the curriculum-as-timetable model. The analysis has interrogated the intertwined concepts of time and development as they operate within dominant models of primary education in England. While previous histories of progressive education have rightly focused on the contributions of a loose but recognised lineage of key educational thinkers and sought not only to revisit their ideas, but to critically historicise the wider temporal assumptions embedded in schooling itself. Drawing on poststructuralist and critical theories, this section approached time not as a neutral

backdrop to education, but as a central organising and informing principle—regulating when, how and at what pace children are expected to learn and grow.

Across mainstream primary education, time is presented today as linear, segmented and standardised: school days begin and end at set hours; terms and holidays are fixed; progress is measured against age-based milestones; and developmental norms are deployed to define what is appropriate or expected at each stage. These temporal structures are often treated as necessary, even natural. Yet they are historically contingent and ideologically and discursively loaded. From the institutionalisation of age-based schooling following the 1870 Education Act (Gillard, 2018), to the influence of psychological developmentalism in curriculum design, time has been used to discipline and differentiate children (Hamilton, 1989).

Central to this discussion is clearly the role of the core concept of *development* itself—as a biological metaphor, a pedagogical principle and even a colonialist practice (McClintock 1995; 2013). Developmentalism, as theorised and critiqued by scholars such as Egan, Masschelein and Burman, presents childhood as a journey toward a finished state of adulthood. This teleological view positions children as not-yet-competent and schools as vehicles for producing compliant, rational adult subjects. As this section showed the historical convergence of child study science, mass schooling and developmental psychology has created a normative developmental timetable against which all children are measured, often to the exclusion of those who do not fit its mould (Morss, 2018).

To challenge these assumptions, this section traced both the philosophical origins and the institutional mechanisms of developmental time in schooling. It drew connections between the progressive efforts which offered alternative views of childhood and education—and contemporary debates over school starting age, timetabling, holiday structures and readiness. These are not merely technical issues but deeply political ones, raising urgent questions about who education is for, what it values and how it discursively 'constructs' the child. By foregrounding time and development as objects of critique, this section also contributes to the wider argument of the thesis: that dominant educational practices are not inevitable but created—and therefore open to reimagining. Through historical analysis, critical theory and attention to contemporary alternatives, the discussion aims to denaturalise the rhythms and logics of mainstream schooling and open space for more plural, responsive and just educational futures (Barad, 2007).

Acknowledging the multiplicity of children's experiences necessitates an education system that respects multiple temporalities, moving beyond age segregation and expected progression to

allow for differential pacing, cyclical learning and moments of pause or regression (Dalli et al., 2012). This approach recognises that growth is not a simple forward march but a complex, relational unfolding within specific cultural, social and material conditions (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Such temporal fluidity challenges the rigidity of current assessment frameworks, fostering spaces where children's unique trajectories are valued rather than pathologised. Time and development in this reimagined system are inseparable from ethical and political choices. Educational processes should cultivate children's agency, voice and critical consciousness, enabling them to engage actively with their environments and social worlds (Kumashiro, 2002). This shift positions children not as passive recipients of predetermined knowledge or developmental stages but as active co-constructors of their learning and identity, capable of resistance and transformation (MacNaughton, 2005; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Such an orientation demands curricula and pedagogies that respond sensitively to children's diverse social positions and lived experiences.

A future system must also radically rethink assessment practices, moving away from standardised, benchmark-driven testing that reduces children to data points and stifles pedagogical flexibility (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2016; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2017). Instead, formative, narrative and participatory assessments that honour children's holistic development and contextualised learning should be foregrounded. These alternatives foster rich understandings of each child's capacities, support educators in responsive planning and resist the punitive pressures characteristic of neoliberal accountability regimes. Inspired by Montessori's pioneering work in mixed-age classrooms and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this new system embraces flexible grouping and pacing, where children learn collaboratively across developmental stages and social backgrounds (Montessori, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Such environments promote peer scaffolding, social diversity and community building, challenging age-based segregation and fostering inclusive educational relationships (Barnard, 2018; Lillard, Jiang & Tong, 2025). This flexibility acknowledges difference as a pedagogical resource rather than a problem. In conclusion, having synthesised these elements, the manifesto envisages a future education system that redefines time and development as dynamic, relational and ethical processes. It moves beyond both the idealised innocence of classical progressive education and the reductive instrumentalism of current policy. Instead, it offers a creative, critical and pluralistic framework for education animated by hope — one that recognises and nurtures the complex, situated and diverse realities of childhood and commits to educational justice and democratic flourishing.

The manifesto challenges hierarchical systems by decentring age as the cornerstone of pedagogical practice. We advocate instead for a conception of learning as emergent, relational and dynamic, without the restrictive timelines imposed by dominant versions of developmental psychology. This conceptual shift requires understanding that learning is not a linear process and does not occur in fixed stages determined by the biological clock. By resisting the tyranny of age, we open spaces for a more inclusive, diverse and fluid conception of becoming—a process that is non-linear and unbound by developmental expectations (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Further to refusing the tyranny of age the manifesto demands time**.** The speed at which education is currently delivered reflects a neoliberal imperative: the constant drive for efficiency, measurable outcomes and productivity. The curriculum, its pacing and the institutional organisation of time all reflect a system that seeks to control and manage the learner's experience to maximise the output of knowledge (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The emphasis on time efficiency constructs learning as a product that can be packaged, quantified and delivered within strict temporal boundaries. The idea of time as merely a container for knowledge transmission is rejected. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of rhizomatic learning, time is not a linear progression but a multiplicity of rhythms and connections. It becomes an expansive, fragmented experience rather than a straight line between cause and effect. To demand time, therefore, is to reclaim time as a space of openness—a counter to the competitive, rush-driven pace that dominates contemporary education. Time should not be seen as something that must be economised, but as an open-ended resource in which learners engage in processes of meaning-making, reflection and deep inquiry. Barad (2010) states that time is non-linear (*spacetimemattering*), the past is not over, and injustice and violence persist materially not just symbolically. She calls for ethics which involves responsibility for entangled inheritances and justice as something which is enacted across time.

To deepen this discussion on these points, the following section turns to broader questions of what knowledge is considered legitimate within these structures (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) and how curriculum itself functions as a cultural, political and epistemological construct. This section questions not only the tempo of education, but the content and purposes it serves — and asks how both might be reimagined in more just, inclusive and transformative ways.

2.3 Knowledge and Curriculum

2.3.1 Introduction

Section 2.3 begins by establishing curriculum and knowledge, defined for this thesis in the Methodology Chapter (1.3), as another two key concepts and sites of debate in educational thought and practice. It imbues itself within this debate and confidently situates itself inspired by the manifesto and 'otherwise' commentary. The aim of the investigation in this section is not only to trace how prevailing ideas about curriculum and knowledge have become entrenched but to use this understanding to imagine alternative possibilities for education. It is argued that the existing statutory curriculum in many countries is deeply flawed—shaped by Eurocentric, Western, heteronormative and ableist assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge. Far from enlightening children, this narrow and prescriptive curriculum restricts their potential and marginalises diverse ways of knowing. Instead, it calls for the removal of rigid, knowledge-reproduction models in favour of curricula rooted in care, collaboration and mutual respect—multiple curricula that grow organically from children's interests and needs within schools and communities. It intends to put creativity high on the agenda. Patston et al. (2021) found that although *creativity* is widely referenced in educational policy documents. They state that there is a gap between policy rhetoric and actionable classroom support. The focussed exploration of some critical viewpoints, of policy documents and specifically of selected philosophical thinkers leads to the development of some 'interrupting questions': whose knowledge is this? Is the canon inevitable? Can learning be standardised? What if education begins in not-knowing? How can education enable children to dream in many directions? Is there a first step to learning, a single path or a ladder to climb?

The modern curriculum is treated as sacrosanct and delivered through imposed sequences, discrete disciplines and measurable outputs (Alexander, 2012). Yet the notion of curriculum as commandment, as a rigid architecture of prescribed knowledge, is not historically inevitable. It reflects the epistemological underpinnings of Enlightenment rationalism and the colonial state: a belief in universal truths, abstract reason and the ordering of knowledge into hierarchies (Hamilton & Zufiaurre, 2014). From the emergence of the modern school system, curriculum, albeit not initially referred to as 'curriculum' (Hamilton, 1989), has served both as a tool of social reproduction and as a cultural sorting mechanism—what Bernstein described as a 'code' that differentiates who may speak, know and be heard (Bernstein, 1977; Yunkaporta, 2023).

Early progressive educational theorists contested these logics in their own ways. Rousseau rejected the imposition of adult knowledge upon children, arguing that they must be free to experience the world and learn through natural interaction (Van Crombrugge, 1995). Froebel's vision of early education was underpinned by symbolic, aesthetic and spiritual learning, not the mastery of disciplinary content. Owen's schools sought to undo the effects of industrial labour through collective, arts-based education grounded in moral and environmental responsibility (Owen, 1991). Dewey critiqued the formal curriculum as alienating and disjointed from lived experience. For Dewey, knowledge must emerge from the learner's own inquiries and social context—education should not be about 'pouring in' but about 'drawing out,' integrating the individual with democratic life (Dewey, 2004). His insistence that curriculum must be flexible, experiential and connected to community practices continues to offer a vital challenge to contemporary technocratic models (Biesta, 2006). Montessori likewise prioritised a child-led curriculum, where the environment is prepared for exploration rather than dictated instruction. For her, the standard curriculum of her time suppressed the deep concentration and discovery that characterises authentic learning. Similarly, Steiner's Waldorf education posits rhythm, imagination and the arts—not in the service of literacy or numeracy outcomes, but as constitutive of human flourishing. Barnes (1997) presents Steiner's educational philosophy as a response to the spiritual and moral fragmentation of modernity, arguing for an integrated approach to education that cultivates intellectual, emotional, practical, and ethical dimensions of human development in the service of individual freedom. Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia approach also positions the child as co-creator of knowledge, with the hundred languages of artistic and sensory expression resisting reduction to a single authoritative curriculum.

Yet the contemporary curriculum in England—particularly since the marketisation of education under neoliberal policy regimes—has become increasingly reductive (Ball, 2013, 2018). Knowledge is defined narrowly, largely through disciplinary boundaries that reflect colonial, patriarchal and Eurocentric histories (Bhambra, 2022). As Bakhurst notes (2011), the curriculum often privileges the *canons of rationality* and Enlightenment epistemes that marginalise narrative knowledge, oral traditions, embodied learning and other non-dominant ways of knowing (Dunkley & Smith, 2022). In this way, curriculum is not merely an educational structure—it is an epistemological claim. To reject curriculum as commandment is not to oppose knowledge but to oppose its enclosure. It is to challenge the hidden curriculum of coloniality, which Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us is never neutral. It is to refuse the idea that there is one canon, one truth, one way to learn.

Thus, the manifesto proposes, *we reject curriculum as commandment*. In its place, we call for curriculum as compost: living, messy, decomposing and recomposing through encounter. Open to rupture, error and revision. It requires, urgently, that *we decolonise education*. Not by adding 'diverse voices' into an unchanged frame, but by dismantling the logics of universality, extraction and mastery that underpin that frame. Decolonising education, as Bhambra (2022) Andreotti (2021) and Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue, is a structural and epistemological task. It demands the reorientation of knowledge production away from the global north and toward plural, relational, situated knowledges. Al-Nakib (2020) argues decolonisation means unlearning the epistemological privilege of the West. This requires more than curricular reform: it calls for ontological shifts in how we understand knowledge, childhood and learning. It calls for a reimagining of the very purpose of education—not as preparation for a fixed future, but as a process of world-making, co-becoming and ethical relation in plural futures (Moss et al., 2010).

De Cruz (2024) argues that wonder and awe are not simply aesthetic, but they are epistemic. Children ask big questions and pursue understanding. Wonder is not marginal, but central to how humans think and learn (De Cruz, 2024). They foreground ambiguity, multiplicity and becoming. Froebel's kindergarten was a symbolic world of blocks, dance and song and Steiner made the arts the very foundation of his education. Zech (2023) describes the Waldorf curriculum as rather a 'diffuse object of examination' (p. 303) because it does not aim at particular standards but at heterogeneous and individualised application. Steiner (1996) counterposed the prevalent curricula, which were content-based and aimed at conveying general knowledge - 'defined to the smallest detail and regulations prescribing each and every one of a teacher's actions' (Steiner, 1989, p. 212), stating instead that education should be derived from the immediate teacher-child relationship. Pedagogical practice needs to be orientated to the child's abilities and interests, which is not possible if rules and regulations are imposed by an external administration or the state (Zech, 2023). Steiner's educational ideas were presented in lectures, and he resisted a written published curriculum. Even when Waldorf schools were eventually forced to publish the first systematic curriculum it was pointed out that 'one always needs to see the child behind the content, because the child is the actual 'curriculum' for the teacher (Richter, 2010, p. 41). In line with this, Dewey argued that 'Curriculum is a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies […] the various studies […] are themselves experience' (1902, pp. 11–12).

Malaguzzi insisted that *nothing without joy* must be a pedagogical imperative. Yet under current policy logics, the arts are increasingly marginalised. Play is seen as frivolous. Wonder

is replaced with measurable outcomes. The joy of learning is sacrificed to the tyranny of performativity. This manifesto is premised on the belief that these educational views of curriculum need not and should not be the province of a select counterculture and that, instead, these early philosophies are fundamentally useful and insightful and can be integrated with other knowledge systems. And so, in this manifesto, *we reclaim play, wonder and the arts as essential*. Not as enrichment, not as reward but as the very grammar of an alternative education. These are not merely pedagogical strategies—they are ethical, political and epistemological commitments. To play is to suspend the given, to explore the otherwise. To wonder is to dwell in uncertainty, to resist the closure of the answer. To create is to participate in the unfinished story of the world. Together, these propositions call not for a better curriculum but for a different future. One shaped by multiplicity, encounter and the ungovernable beauty of becoming.

In this section the concept of knowledge, core knowledge, 'powerful knowledge' and alternative understandings of knowledge are used to search for answers and reimaginings. We then explore the curriculum and, in particular, the National Curriculum (NC), briefly explained for readers not immersed in the English education system in the Methodology chapter (1.3). It attempts to synthesise some of the many critiques of the NC as evidence in favour for the argument of the need to reimagine curricula in this country. The chapter works towards a gathering of alternative curricula literature and international curricula innovations which act to inspire the manifesto proposals already indicated. It may be considered unwise and contrary to the aims of the 1988 introduction of the NC, which sought to reduce inconsistencies, to propose the rejection of a universal curriculum with concerns for equity, but the radical proposal wishes to go to the root of curriculum design and impose careful, considered, relational, critical reflection on the 'knowledge' which any curriculum seeks to enable in learners (Miedema, 2023).

2.3.2 Knowledge

Poststructuralist inspired theorists have long questioned the stability and authority of 'official knowledge' (Lister, 2003). Rather than treating curriculum as a fixed body of truths to be transmitted, they see it as a contested terrain shaped by power, discourse and ideology (Foucault, 1977; Lather, 2007). The apparent neutrality of curriculum conceals its role in constructing subjectivities, producing norms and legitimising certain worldviews over others.

What counts as ‘knowledge’ in schools is not a universal truth, but the result of historical, political and epistemological choices — often aligned with colonial, capitalist and patriarchal logics. In this light, curriculum becomes a space where cultural hierarchies are reproduced under the guise of objectivity, narrowing what it means to know, to learn and to be educated.

Contemporary debates about the National Curriculum in England illustrate these tensions. On one hand, advocates of ‘core knowledge’ such as Hirsch (1987) and Young (2008) argue that a shared body of disciplinary knowledge is a prerequisite for equity and intellectual development. Yet critics highlight how such frameworks risk privileging certain cultural narratives at the expense of diversity and inclusion (Lister, 2003) narrowing curriculum and increasing the nationalistic narrative (Ford, 2022). As Biesta (2010c) cautions, curriculum can easily be reduced to a ‘technical problem’ of delivery and measurement, oriented around outcomes and accountability rather than meaningful engagement with knowledge. This critique has been reinforced by empirical studies showing how testing regimes and standards discourse marginalise culturally diverse perspectives, perpetuating exclusion under the guise of universality and readiness (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). These debates resonate strongly with broader and longstanding critiques of knowledge as socially constructed and bound up with power, identity and exclusion (Bernstein, 2001; Bhambra et al., 2018; Arday, 2021). They also provide a backdrop for current UK research that seeks to reconfigure curriculum through decolonial and pluralist lenses (Mair et al., 2023; Andreotti, 2011; Patel, 2016) where even within the physical sciences, exploratory initiatives are questioning whose contributions are recognised in disciplinary histories and how this shapes the knowledge students encounter (Harding, 2015; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

At stake in these debates is the power of curriculum to function as a totalising cultural narrative—one that presents particular knowledge traditions as universal, neutral, and inevitable, while rendering alternatives marginal or unintelligible. Rewriting curriculum in this sense does not require the abandonment of shared knowledge, but a re-framing of disciplinary traditions as historically situated, contested and open to dialogue. Such an approach seeks to pluralise rather than replace dominant narratives, restoring contingency and ethical responsibility to curriculum design. In doing so, education is repositioned not as the transmission of settled truths, but as an ongoing, collective negotiation over what knowledge matters and why. At the same time, the rapid growth of digital technologies and artificial intelligence has raised fresh questions about what counts as valuable knowledge and how it should be taught. For some, the ubiquity of information suggests that education should

emphasise critical evaluation, creativity and adaptability rather than memorisation (Costa & Murphy, 2025). Others caution, however, that outsourcing knowledge to machines risks hollowing out deep understanding and ethical judgment (Selwyn, 2016; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022). Costa and Murphy (2025), for example, argue that much of the current framing of generative AI in education privileges efficiency and innovation while obscuring the very capacities of judgment and critical reasoning that education should cultivate, and that already universities have ceded ground in digital public discourse to marketised forms of communication that undercut deliberative intellectual engagement. Taken together, these debates reveal that knowledge in education is never a settled category but remains contested, negotiated and redefined across philosophical, policy and practical domains.

If debates about knowledge reveal its contingent, political and contested nature, then curriculum can be understood as the principal site where these struggles are negotiated in practice. Curriculum does not merely select and organise content; it institutionalises decisions about what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose voices are amplified, and which epistemologies are marginalised. As such, curriculum embodies the tension between stability and change: it is both a mechanism for transmitting disciplinary traditions and a space for reimagining educational futures. In this way, theorisations of knowledge as power, discourse and plurality translate directly into questions of curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment. The following section therefore turns to curriculum, examining how its purposes and forms have been theorised, contested and reconfigured in contemporary educational debates.

2.3.3 Curriculum and the National Curriculum

Curriculum, as currently constituted functions as an instrument of epistemic sovereignty. Its prescriptive structure authorises certain knowledges while silencing others, operating through the disciplines to enforce a canon of rationality historically rooted in Eurocentric, Enlightenment epistemologies. The division of knowledge into fixed, examinable subjects reifies linear narratives of progress and positions scientific rationality as the highest form of knowing, often at the expense of narrative, embodied, or relational knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). Bakhurst (2011) warns that canons of rationality become exclusionary—marginalising forms of thought that do not conform to dominant norms, even when these other ways of knowing may be more attuned to relationality, ethical interdependence or ecological urgency. Disciplinary boundaries create the illusion of objectivity, yet they conceal the contingent, political nature of knowledge production. Derrida's (1995) concept of the *archive* reminds us that every

curriculum is also an act of forgetting—a selective remembering shaped by power. The curriculum functions, in Foucault's terms, as a technology of power, organising knowledge in ways that perpetuate particular social, political and cultural norms (Foucault, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Baker, 2001). The marginalisation of play, wonder and the arts is not incidental but symptomatic of curriculum's instrumentalism. These domains—often dismissed as supplementary—are foundational to alternative ways of knowing.

This section examines curriculum, and specifically the National Curriculum in England, as a site where power, knowledge and normativity converge. By exposing how curriculum operates as an epistemological gatekeeper—privileging certain histories, cultures and forms of reason while marginalising others—it establishes the conditions for the manifesto's rejection of curriculum as commandment and its call to decolonise education as both a political and pedagogical necessity. Gerrard et al. (2013) position curriculum at the heart of educational governance, in Australia, influencing pedagogy, organisation and assessment.

Finding a universally accepted definition of curriculum is difficult. Becher and Maclure (2024) note that a narrow definition of curriculum is often treated as synonymous with syllabus: a prescribed body of content to be delivered. Traditional accounts have presented curriculum as a neutral plan of study or sequence of subjects to be mastered (Tyler, 1949), emphasising structure, coherence and measurable outcomes. Critical perspectives, however, challenge this view, arguing that curriculum is never a neutral vehicle for content delivery but a deeply political construction that reflects power, values and social ordering (Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 2001; Winter, 2017). Since its origins (Hamilton, 1989), curriculum has been a complex and multifaceted construct shaped by educational theory, cultural context and political purpose. In its broadest sense, curriculum can be understood as encompassing everything a pupil experiences at school (Becher & Maclure, 2024), positioning it as synonymous with schooling itself if education is confined to institutional contexts. Policy scholars, such as Rizvi and Lingard (2009), emphasise that curriculum actively shapes educational practice and pupil experience yet lament its persistent reduction to a technical policy instrument—'implemented or enacted in schools and classrooms through pedagogy and framed by systemic evaluation, assessment and testing policies' (Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013, p. 549). As a foundational component of educational systems (He, Shultz & Schubert, 2015), curriculum reflects societal priorities, cultural values and philosophical assumptions about what knowledge matters. While often described as dynamic and responsive to social change (Wyse, Hayward & Pandya, 2016), curriculum is also a powerful mechanism for stabilising norms and reproducing dominant epistemologies. In line with Pinar (2012), the manifesto advanced in this thesis insists that

curriculum must be understood not merely as a programme of knowledge delivery, but as a lived, relational and interpretive experience that shapes identities, subjectivities and belonging.

Across all countries, national curricula make these dynamics explicit. Mandated curricula vary according to political priorities and educational philosophies, embedding particular values through acts of selection and exclusion. As Schwab (1983) argued, curriculum is never simply content but a series of judgments and choices. Gershon and Helfenbein (2023) emphasise that what is deemed 'normal' or 'valuable' always reflects a decision drawn from infinite alternatives, a point encapsulated by Sealy's (2020) assertion that 'every time we choose to include something, we are also choosing not to include many other possibilities' (p. 3). In England, curriculum debates have long centred on tensions between disciplinary knowledge and broader educational aims. The National Curriculum (NC) embodies a drive towards standardisation, accountability and the consolidation of core knowledge (Young, 2008; Hirsch, 1987), while critics highlight how such frameworks marginalise diverse perspectives and reproduce exclusionary practices (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Lister, 2003). Poststructuralist, feminist and decolonial scholars increasingly frame curriculum as a contested epistemic terrain where cultural and political struggles are inscribed (Andrews, 2016; Bhambra et al., 2018; Arday, 2021), opening possibilities for reimagining curriculum as plural, relational (Halle-Erby, 2024) and justice-oriented (Andreotti, 2014; Andrews, 2020).

Introduced in 1988, the NC in England sought to standardise educational provision, set age-related expectations and enable national comparison of pupil performance (Fisher, 2008). Prior to this, curriculum was shaped locally by Local Educational Authorities (LEAs), schools and teacher discretion, resulting in considerable regional variation (Chitty, 1988; Alexander, 2000). While this decentralised model enabled innovation and community responsiveness, it also produced inconsistencies. The introduction of the NC marked a decisive shift towards centralisation, aligning education more closely with political and economic priorities and relocating curricular authority from professionals to the state (Jones, 2016).

This shift stands in contrast to earlier moments in English curriculum thinking, notably the Plowden Report (1967), which foregrounded a child-centred pedagogy, experiential learning and holistic development. Plowden advocated curricula responsive to children's interests and developmental needs, encouraging flexibility, integration and teacher autonomy (Croll, 2005; Alexander, 2018). Although its influence was later curtailed by the NC, Plowden articulated enduring tensions that continue to shape curriculum debates: standardisation versus flexibility,

disciplinary transmission versus lived experience and education's role in ethical and social development (Alexander, 2018).

The NC's prescriptive, age-banded and subject-segmented structure embodies the very standardisation and linear developmentalism critiqued throughout this chapter. Its rigid benchmarks and assessment schedules constrain professional autonomy and children's agency, prioritising content coverage and performance over inquiry, collaboration and meaning-making. As Dewey (1997b) argued, curriculum should emerge from lived experience and shared inquiry rather than predetermined standards imposed from above. Instead, the current system reduces education to measurable outcomes, marginalising learners who do not conform to normative developmental timelines and undermining schooling's democratic potential.

Critiques of the NC consistently identify several key limitations: its age-stage expectations constrain learners and teachers and restrict curricular breadth (Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023); its failure to realise social justice produces systemic exclusion (Eastman et al., 2011); its reliance on external motivation through grades and rewards shapes compliance rather than curiosity; the unrealistic expectations lead to early experiences of failure (Prospero, 2023); and its subject-centred design raises questions about the relevance of prescribed knowledge (Manyukhina, 2022). Despite intentions to promote equity, its rigidity and accountability-driven structures narrow teaching and learning, stifling creativity, criticality and responsiveness (Claxton, 2021; Whetton, 2009; Robinson, 2021). This narrowing echoes earlier models of mass education, such as the Monitorial system, which prioritised efficiency, rote learning and control (Mesquita, 2012; Hamilton, 1989). While contexts differ, the persistent emphasis on core subjects and standardisation reveals a historical continuity in curricular control. As Harris (2016) argues, the curriculum has become so narrow that it bores both pupils and teachers and crushes creativity - a claim debated some, for example, Handscombe (2016) and supported by others, such as Raymond (2018). The dominance of summative assessment reinforces a one-size-fits-all model that fails to adequately accommodate diverse developmental trajectories or foster genuine engagement (Alexander, 2012; Prospero, 2023).

Several education systems internationally have, in recent years, moved deliberately away from narrow accountability-driven curricula. Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, for example, positions flourishing—rather than attainment alone—as its central aim, asserting that education should equip children with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life, learning and work (Education Scotland, 2019). Similarly, Wales has undertaken a radical restructuring of its curriculum, rejecting the dominant English policy model of performativity and academic

standardisation in favour of learner-centred, integrated and collaborative approaches (Power, Taylor & Newton, 2020). Evidence shows that learner-centred education is a conceptually diverse and context-dependent practice (Bremner, 2021; Bremner et al., 2022; Bremner et al., 2023) but it undermines simplistic binaries and its intent is ethical and relational. The Curriculum for Wales promotes active learning, real-world relevance and cross-disciplinary planning (Hwb, 2022, 2023). Even in traditionally centralised systems such as France, recent reforms have emphasised interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and responsiveness to digital and social change (Jezard, 2017). Finland—long recognised for its progressive, child-centred approach—has continued to deepen curricular flexibility, interdisciplinary learning and personalised support for diverse learners (Nikkola et al., 2024).

In contrast, England increasingly appears as an outlier (Moss, Hodgson & Cousin, 2023). While other systems broaden curricular aims to foster independent, creative and active citizenship (Smith et al., 2016), England has continued to restrict teacher autonomy and pedagogical flexibility through intensified emphasis on attainment in core subjects, earlier benchmarking and tightly prescribed content (Furlong, 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that the 'broad and balanced curriculum' promised with the introduction of the National Curriculum (NC) in 1988 has never been realised and has, in fact, been progressively curtailed through successive reforms (Alexander, 2012).

This narrowing is evident across subject domains. Wrigley (2019) contrasts England's limited attention to children's interests with Finland's integration of Environmental and Natural Studies, which connects learning to health, place and everyday experience. Since 2014, Mathematics in England has increasingly prioritised basic calculation and mental arithmetic, often rendering the subject remote from children's lived realities (Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023). In English, the long-standing emphasis on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPAG), nationally mandated through the NC, has shown no clear benefits for narrative writing and has further detached writing from children's experiences (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022; Braun & Maguire, 2020). Spoken language has similarly been marginalised, driven by ministerial concerns that dialogue might devolve into 'idle chat' (Alexander, 2012).

More broadly, areas such as the creative and performing arts, design and technology and citizenship education have been systematically diminished or removed from the curriculum. The result, as Wrigley (2019) argues, is that unless children encounter particularly enlightened teachers, they are offered learning that is developmentally inappropriate and socially and culturally remote. This sustained narrowing of curricular purpose and possibility provides a

critical impetus for the manifesto's call to reject curriculum as a fixed, centralised instrument of control and to reimagine education as plural, relational and responsive to children's lives.

Some international research has focussed on the value of culturally responsive pedagogies and curriculum in addressing inequities in education. Education suffers when ideas are socially reproduced without question, promoting dominant discourses as 'taken for granted' truths and consequently marginalising different perspectives (Holland et al., 1998). Researchers in America have found that a high number of 'white' teachers have a 'colour blind' view of diversity in the classroom (Ullucci & Battey, 2011) or have simplified understanding of culturally responsive curriculums, demonstrated by simply including cultural celebrations (Sleeter, 2011). Decolonisation is not a rhetorical strategy, nor an optional curriculum enhancement. It is an urgent, epistemic intervention into the structures of knowledge that dominate educational practice (Sefa Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024). Colonialism, both historical and ongoing, continues to shape the ways in which knowledge is constructed and who gets to produce it. The Western canon, in particular, has been central to this project of epistemic violence, imposing Eurocentric frameworks while marginalising indigenous, subaltern and non-Western ways of knowing (Bhambra, 2022; de Sousa Santos, 2018; Arday, 2021; Smith, 2012).

Rethinking curricula is an ethical challenge (Giroux, 2004), because it calls on educators to take responsibility for the colonial legacies embedded in schooling and to work towards more just, inclusive and equitable educational practices. In societies that are faced with many heterogeneous ethical issues, education has been shown to have failed to redress social and cultural inequality (Apple, 2013, 2018; Giroux, 2004, 2006, 2018). In some cases, education has become a normative tool for *unjust* social cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Andreotti and de Souza (2012) argue that dominant curriculum frameworks can be stifling and harmful, positioning millions of learners as 'in deficit' in relation to normative epistemic standards. When education systems make mistakes, there are significant consequences for many. It is essential that all choices made are conscientiously and morally considered. One such consideration which needs to be made is demanded by anti-colonial, decolonial and post-colonial movements which state that curriculum designers need to question the intrinsically assumed superiority of Western literature and education and endorse strategies and frameworks to combat the violent and powerful cognitive, linguistic and cultural effects of colonial education (Mishra, 2023). Their challenge demands that we forge new institutions, arrangements and collectives and ensure the decolonial principle guides our 'thinking, knowing and learning between the past and dead futures to engage a metaphysics of being untethered to race, patriarchal heteronormativity, capital and territory' (Mishra, 2023, p. 36). Multiple

perspectives should be used to inform the curriculum (Sisson, Whitington & Shin, 2020) and teachers must learn to reflect critically on dominant discourses during their training and furthermore in their role (Nganga, 2015). Engaging children in curriculum construction should 'problematise teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the child-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling and society' ().

The National Curriculum in England does not represent the diversity in England today (Burbidge, 2021). Certain cultures, perspectives and histories are under-represented. It predominantly reflects the experiences, values, histories of a particular group. This lack of representation can lead to problems of self-esteem and a sense of belonging. There can be reinforcement of stereotypes which may lead to discrimination and impact learners' perceptions of themselves and others (Burbidge, 2021). Decolonising education means confronting such implicit biases within curricula and pedagogy. It requires reframing knowledge production to make space for indigenous epistemologies, non-Western philosophies and alternative ways of knowing that have been systematically excluded. This process is disruptive, demanding an unlearning of long-held assumptions about who owns knowledge, who controls the narrative and whose histories are validated (Fanon, 1967; Memmi, 1991, Misiaszek, 2023).

It is time therefore to consider the power of the curriculum and to call for epistemological plurality: an education that can hold the complexity of multiple truths while remaining alert to the dangers of misinformation, anti-science rhetoric and conspiratorial thinking. Post-truth politics and flat-earth logics do not emerge from too much epistemic freedom, but from the erosion of critical pedagogy itself—where students are taught to memorise rather than to think, to consume rather than to question. It is time to contest the fixity, advocating for curriculum as a fluid, open-ended process—one that emerges from the interactions between learners, teachers and the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. Knowledge, in this sense, is not a pre-given truth, but a shared construction that evolves as learners engage with the world and with people and 'more-than-humans' around them. This calls for an education system that is responsive, adaptive and emergent—where curriculum is not imposed, but co-constructed with the learners themselves, allowing for a diversity of voices, stories and experiences to shape the learning journey (Rancière, 1987). An emancipatory curriculum must create the conditions for epistemic discernment without enforcing epistemic obedience. It must equip learners to navigate uncertainty, evaluate competing claims and situate themselves ethically within a world in flux. This is especially urgent in the context of the climate crisis, which demands not only scientific understanding but also affective, ethical and imaginative capacities.

Reimagining curriculum requires more than updating content; it requires dismantling the hierarchies of knowing that underwrite our current ecological and social crises. A socially just curriculum provides parity-of-participation in children's 'opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity' (UNCRC, 1989). It reflects participatory values by encouraging the development of every child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. When restricted to the National Curriculum that does not value all talents and abilities as equal (Burbridge, 2021) and pushes schools towards traditional methods where teachers talk and pupils listen, it can be difficult to provide opportunities for children to express their actual experiences, have their voices heard and their requests acted on. Some children, need help to resist the imposition of oppressive, disempowering and commonly accepted educational practices (Cook-Sather, 2006).

It is at this juncture—between critique and possibility—that alternative curricular imaginaries become vital.

2.3.4 Curriculums of joy, play, wonder and hope

Building on the understanding of curriculum as a cultural and epistemological construct, the work of Froebel offers a powerful counterpoint to traditional, rigidly structured models of education. For Froebel, curriculum should not simply reflect abstract knowledge imposed from above but should emerge from the child's engagement with the world around them—its culture, nature and relationships. His idea of *self-activity* (*Selbsttätigkeit)*, first discussed in the section 2.2.5 and reused here for emphasis of an essential inspirational element, posits that children are active participants in their own learning process, engaging with materials and experiences that allow for growth and exploration. He claimed that children should be at all times active and the 'activity should enlist his entire self in all the phases of being' (Froebel, 2005, p. 11). Froebel stressed the spontaneity of action, on the adaptation of all activities to the child's power and on the full, whole-hearted, sympathetic, active co-operation of the teacher whom he urged to 'live (to learn and do) with the children' (Froebel, 2005, p. 15). In this way, Froebel's educational ideals challenged the dominant, top-down models of curriculum that did and still do marginalise the child's voice and experiences. Rather than adhering to a one-size-fits-all system, Froebel's vision invites educators to design curricula that are responsive to the diverse needs, interests and developmental rhythms of the children in their care, allowing for a more flexible and equitable form of learning.

> All true education […] should be simultaneously double-sided – giving and taking, uniting and dividing, prescribing and following, active and passive, positive yet giving scope, firm and yielding (Froebel, 2005, p. 14).

Froebel's Kindergarten model presented a foundational reimagining of curriculum as relational, symbolic and 'coupled with joy'—resisting the compartmentalised, linear structures dominant in many contemporary primary education systems. Central to Froebel's approach and the current Froebelian influence in schools and nurseries is the integration of play, not as frivolous activity, but as a vital mode of symbolic expression through which children make meaning, explore relationships and come to know the world. His use of *gifts* and *occupations* offered open-ended materials that allowed for imaginative manipulation, patterning and construction—blurring the boundaries between subjects and encouraging children to perceive knowledge as interconnected and holistic. For Froebel, learning was not about the sequential mastery of discrete facts, but about nurturing the unfolding of the child's inner life in harmony with their environment, peers and community and ultimately God. Knowledge, in this sense, is co-constructed through experience and dialogue, rather than delivered through predefined outcomes. The Kindergarten becomes a microcosm of, albeit religious, democratic education: emergent, collaborative and rooted in trust in the child's capacities. As such, Froebel's curriculum vision stands in direct contrast to the hierarchical and time-bound structures critiqued in current primary mainstream English education, offering a model where developmental diversity and creative subjectivity are honoured within the everyday practices of education.

Froebel's emphasis on harmony and unity may also obscure relations of power: his teacher is not a neutral guide but a moral Christian architect, quietly steering the child toward a vision of goodness that is preordained, not co-constructed. Froebel's model reveals tensions—particularly the universalising assumptions embedded in notions of 'natural' development and harmony. The child envisioned is often implicitly white, middle-class and European, reflecting the socio-cultural norms of his time (Cannella, 1997). Like Rousseau, Froebel viewed childhood as a sacred and unique stage, deserving of protection from the corrupting forces of adult society. His vision of learning through play, songs, movement and nature reflected Pestalozzian ideals of sensory engagement and moral development, while echoing Owen's ambition for education to serve broader social harmony. Yet, when approached through a poststructuralist lens, Froebel's notion of the child as an unfolding organic unity—guided by divine laws and revealed through structured symbolic activities—can be seen to carry assumptions of developmental teleology and normative Western Christian child trajectories, as is also a serious critique of the earlier progressive thinkers, particularly Pestalozzi. Froebel's carefully

orchestrated materials, while innovative, can imply a universal pathway for learning that may marginalise cultural difference, neurodiversity or resistant forms of expression. This essentialism, when re-inscribed in contemporary curricula, can inadvertently pathologise children who resist or fail to 'unfold' in expected ways. While Froebel offers an important alternative to rigid, standardised education systems, a more radically democratic and socially just pedagogy would extend his relational vision by foregrounding voice, resistance and multiplicity—not simply the natural child as discussed previously in relation to Rousseau, but the child situated in history, culture and struggle.

Dewey's critique of Froebel reveals a generative tension between two progressive educational visions. While Dewey acknowledged Froebel's pioneering efforts to place the child at the centre of educational experience and valued his attention to play and symbolic learning, he ultimately found Froebel's metaphysical idealism problematic (Beatty, 2017). Froebel's belief in a divine, unfolding order—where education mirrored the spiritual development of the child—clashed with Dewey's pragmatist commitment to empirical inquiry and social engagement. Dewey (1902) warned that Froebel's emphasis on abstract symbolism, such as the prescribed use of geometric *gifts* risked disconnecting the learner from lived experience. In Dewey's view, learning should not follow a predetermined metaphysical pattern but emerge from the concrete problems children face in their social world. Froebel's Kindergarten represents an imaginative break from content-driven schooling—but one that stops short of the radical transformation envisioned by later critical educators. His model invites reworking: not as a return to innocence or natural law, but as a springboard for reimagining education as relational, emergent and open to plurality, where children co-create meaning. Froebel's contributions remain valuable—but only when treated as a dialogic foundation, not a fixed doctrine.

In contrast to Froebel's structured symbolism and moral-spiritual aims, Dewey advanced a model of education as inquiry—collaborative, open-ended and rooted in the lived experiences of the child. Rather than viewing the teacher as a moral guide to spiritual unfolding, Dewey saw the educator as a facilitator of inquiry, helping children pose questions, investigate problems and reflect upon the consequences of their actions. His oft-quoted phrase, 'education is not preparation for life; education is life itself' (Dewey, 1897, pp.77-80), encapsulates this ethos: learning must be connected to democratic life and social participation, not abstract ideals or future readiness alone. Dewey's pedagogical method rejected both rote memorisation and rigid curriculum sequencing in favour of project-based, experimental learning rooted in dialogue and action (Cremin, 1959). In doing so, he aligned education with democratic values of participation, plurality and collective inquiry. Dewey inspires the manifesto proposals that

learning is relational and the call for schools to be rooted in community as well as rejecting the curriculum and reimagining experientially inspired learning.

Dewey's vision remains pivotal in challenging the logic of standardised curricula. His critique prefigures contemporary concerns about developmentalism and the marginalisation of children whose learning does not fit normative timelines. Standardisation, by assuming a fixed body of knowledge and linear progression, contradicts Dewey's vision of a responsive, evolving curriculum that emerges from the dynamic interaction between learners, teachers and the world. It is possible to reframe Deweyan inquiry not only as a method but as an ethical-political stance: a refusal to define the child in advance or reduce learning to outcomes. Dewey's work invites us to imagine schools as sites of possibility where education becomes a mode of collective world-making—informed by the present, oriented to change and grounded in lived social realities rather than imposed abstractions. Dewey's philosophy of education, while inheriting Froebel's commitment to experiential and inquiry-based learning, introduced a more socially dynamic and democratic model. Rejecting Froebel's idealisation of family and natural harmony, as previously discussed, Dewey emphasised the school as a social institution where collaborative learning and the peer group replaced familial authority. Dewey's international influence helped popularise curricula that privileged learning as a social, active process, highlighting the importance of adaptability and problem-solving within community contexts. Dewey's inquiry-based curriculum offers a powerful counterpoint, emphasising collaborative inquiry, reflection and democratic participation. He argued that education must be a process of active engagement and problem-solving within a community, rather than passive absorption of prescribed content (Dewey, 2004).

As with all the inspirational, historical figures, included here, we must recognise the limits of this legacy. The ideals of Dewey and Froebel require structural and cultural supports often absent in current schooling systems. Their visions, while inspiring, may not fully address how socio-economic inequalities and political agendas shape the dominance of compliance-based pedagogy and testing regimes (MacNaughton, 2005). Thus, while offering valuable ideals, these models must be integrated with critical awareness of power, difference and context to truly transform the curriculum. Dewey's and Froebel's educational writing and philosophical legacies profoundly shaped progressive curriculum reform in England during the 1960s. Initiatives such as the Plowden Report (1967) sought to reimagine primary education through child-centred principles, integrated subject areas and an emphasis on experiential learning. Plowden foregrounded children's interests, holistic development and democratic participation, articulating a utopian aspiration for education as a space of flourishing rather than mere

instruction. However, these ideals proved politically fragile as we will discuss further in Chapter 4. Subsequent policy shifts reasserted centralised control through standardisation, assessment and accountability, revealing the contested and deeply political nature of curriculum design (Tisdall, 2020).

Democratic schools emphasise experiential learning (De Groot & Lo, 2021). Reggio Emilia also has experiential learning at its core, alongside the role of the environment and strong community involvement (Edwards, 2002). The curriculum in Forest Schools is project-based and experiential. Projects are grounded in children's interests and observations. They often involve collaborative work, problem-solving and creativity. Children are shown how to craft with natural materials. There is an emphasis on building and construction projects, experiments and investigations related to the natural world (Waite, Bølling & Bentsen, 2016; Warden, 2007, 2010; Dabaja, 2021). Play, inspired by Vygotsky (1978), can be applied at all stages of education. Arnott (2023) argues that play, creativity, and adventure are central to meaningful learning, contending that education systems which marginalise excitement, risk, and joy undermine children's engagement, imagination, and capacity for deep understanding. Imagined worlds, artistic representations (drama, novels) and simulations have a special role in learning. Role play can offer children the opportunity to problem solve real-world problems in creative and innovative ways (Wrigley, 2019). Lupinacci, Happel-Parkins and Turner (2023) argue for the importance of 'big issues' to be included in curriculum debates:

> Considering the difficult conditions for diversity and life on the planet due to climate change (IPCC, 2022) and the connected consequences including, but not limited to: poverty, famine, pandemics (Shah, 2020) and increased violent conflict as a result of devastating inequity–educators as leaders are presented with the challenge of rethinking education and doing so with close attention to what can be done differently in curriculum and pedagogy (p. 202).

Naturalist, value-centred and holistic models of curriculum are evident in nature pre-schools and Forest Schools. Conservationist, problem solving, scientific and sustainability currents flow through these eco-school programs. The socially critical tones come through vividly in the literature on school gardens and nature-based participatory research with children (Jagger, 2023). 'Environmental education is relevant throughout the life course, from infancy through senior citizenship, in formal and nonformal venues' (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020, p. 2). Opportunities for children to face and overcome challenges, foster resilience and confidence and promote self-reliance and a sense of achievement are offered. There is an emphasis on mindfulness and reflection through activities like nature journaling and quiet observation and

support for emotional development through positive interactions and self-expression (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019).

The opportunity to learn outdoors in Forest School settings has demonstrated excellent results in terms of emotional well-being. McCree, Cutting & Sherwin (2018) encourage readers to trust in the evidence provided by Outdoor Learning advocates. Their research findings indicate that positive well-being outcomes, learning competencies and attendance may best be served by learning outdoors. These organisations focus not on the goals for assessment but on engaging children restoratively within nature. The Common Worlds Research Collective, demonstrate the impact on children working in nature, within the Australian context. A key concept in their literature is *space*. They propose that education needs to remake 'worlds' that recognise humans are part of the environment not separate form it and are vulnerable within it. Humans should learn from noticing what is already going on in the worlds around them and learn that they share a responsibility to recuperate the damaged worlds to ensure that these worlds can sustain life for future generations (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw & Blaise, 2024). One of the aims for education is to encourage inclusive modes of learning and assemble and learn with difference and heterogeneity but not with the intention of creating sameness (Taylor & Giugni, 2012). Common worlds take account of children's relations with all the others in the worlds – including the more-than-human others (discussed further in section 2.5.2).

The reimagined curriculum therefore must begin with the Forest School, Democratic school, Froebel, Dewey and Reggio Emilia radical respect for the plurality, unpredictability and dignity of children's lives and a plurality of epistemologies. Biesta (2013) argues for an education that does not reduce learners to future economic actors or measurable outputs. Instead of viewing children as empty vessels progressing through normative developmental stages, we can approach children as meaning-makers, storytellers and co-authors of knowledges. Informed by poststructuralist attention to difference and critical pedagogy's focus on agency, such an approach invites the decolonisation of school knowledge and a dismantling of the hierarchies that restrict what and how children can learn. It opens space for multiple epistemologies, cultural knowledges and child-led inquiries that challenge the very foundations of curriculum-as-usual. Schools should be 'autonomous educational organisations which distance themselves from the prescription and insist on the primacy of teacher autonomy and teacher responsibility in education' (Zech, 2023, p.309).

2.3.5 Conclusion

As evidenced and further exploring more specifically Friere's assertion about education, curriculum is never a neutral or purely technical instrument. Rather, it functions as a cultural and epistemological construct that reflects particular worldviews, values and power relations. What counts as legitimate knowledge in schools is shaped by historical struggles over whose voices are heard, whose experiences are recognised and whose ways of knowing are validated (Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 2001). In this sense, curriculum serves as a site of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Collins, 2009), privileging dominant knowledge systems while marginalising others. Epistemologically, it tends to elevate abstract, decontextualised knowledge over embodied, relational and local forms of understanding. This has significant implications for learners, particularly those from minoritised backgrounds whose cultural knowledge and lived realities may be rendered invisible or framed as deficits. As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues, culturally sustaining pedagogies must challenge these exclusions by validating multiple ways of knowing and being in the world. In reimagining curriculum through a critical and inclusive lens, we begin to see it not as a fixed script to be delivered, but as a dynamic, relational and ethical practice rooted in dialogue, plurality and justice. The manifesto proposes emergent curricula growing from children's questions, stories and worlds. Education should not begin with content, but with context – with the lived experiences of the learners and their knowledges.

Designing a primary curriculum that embraces the cultural and regional diversity of England while being attuned to children's interests and developmental needs requires a delicate balance between responsiveness and universality. Rousseau (1991) advocates for education that follows the natural development of the child free from premature academic instruction and warns against the harm of adult-imposed agendas that disrupt the child's unfolding capacities. Pestalozzi, similarly, emphasised education of the head, heart and hands seeking to cultivate intellectual, moral and practical capacities through close attention to each child's context and needs. Owen's New Lanark experiment attempted to embed character formation in early education, believing that shaping children into rational and cooperative citizens required both structured guidance and nurturing conditions. Froebel extended this philosophy where learning through play, exploration and symbolic activity allows the curriculum to emerge organically from the child's innate curiosity and desire for meaning. Drawing on these thinkers, a contemporary curriculum which mandates the cultivation of care for self and all others, nature and the world, could allow for local adaptation — acknowledging differences in language, culture, community and environment — while retaining a shared commitment to universal

developmental principles: the valuing of play, moral becoming, experiential learning and the child as an active agent in their own learning. As Froebel explained, 'the free self-activity of the child is the only sure foundation of all education' (Froebel, 2005 p. 30). Yet this freedom, as Rousseau and Owen both recognised, must be nurtured within environments that structure time, values and relationships not rigidly and based on development expectations, but in ways that are socially and morally coherent. Such a curriculum would not impose uniform content, but rather commit to a universal ethic of care, dignity and intellectual empowerment, expressed through diverse forms across England's varied educational landscapes.

The legacies of Froebel and Dewey continue to inform educational possibilities, but only when critically reworked. The challenge ahead is to retain what is valuable—such as play, inquiry and social learning—while resisting the exclusionary and regulatory impulses that have constrained education. This synthesis opens pathways towards curricula that are inclusive, dynamic and imaginative, preparing children not just for an 'ideal' adulthood but for multiple, diverse futures. By challenging the normative boundaries of what knowledge counts and who it serves, educators can reclaim curriculum as a site of social justice and relational engagement.

In conclusion, we agree with Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2023), that the current curriculum and assessment arrangements narrow children's opportunities for participation in engaged learning which undermines wellbeing and brings social justice into question. If curriculum determines what knowledge is valued and whose histories are told, then the structures of power that underpin ability, behaviour and assessment determine who is permitted to learn, to be seen as capable and to belong. Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2023) researching mathematical literacy show that assessment drives curriculum, pedagogy and learners' identities. From questions of *what* is learned, we now turn to *who* is positioned as teachable—and at what cost.

2.4 Power and ability

2.4.1 Introduction

This section builds on the preceding analysis of curriculum and knowledge to critically examine how notions of power and ability are co-constructed in educational settings, often under the guise of objectivity or meritocracy. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) concept of *epistemic injustice* and Foucault's (1977) theory of surveillance and disciplinary power, it interrogates how assessment systems and classroom practices simultaneously shape, measure and constrain

learners' identities and trajectories. As Cushing (2020) observes, contemporary behaviour and language policies operate as mechanisms of epistemic control, positioning children's bodies and voices as objects of regulation rather than participants in dialogue. In doing so, it foregrounds a central tension within contemporary education: the claim to inclusive and equitable learning environments and the persistence of exclusionary systems that sort, label and limit. Within this context, ability emerges not as an innate or stable attribute but as a socially constructed category, one mediated by systems of assessment and grounded in historical legacies of social ordering. The section explores two overlapping dimensions of how power operates in relation to assessment: first, through the classification and deficit-laden construction of ability and second, through the regulatory surveillance of progress and performance. Ultimately, it argues for a radical reimagining of assessment structures to support inclusive, justice-oriented education.

It leads to the proposal *we honour difference, not deficit*. Drawing from theorists such as Irigaray, Butler and Foucault, the idea that difference is a deviation from a fixed norm is rejected. Instead, difference is constitutive of subjectivity. To honour difference is not merely to accommodate it but to recognise it as central to knowledge production, creativity and ethical relation. It means viewing neurodivergence, disability and cultural dissonance not as educational challenges, but as epistemic contributions. As Foucault argues, disciplinary power operates by establishing norms, marking deviations from them, and sanctioning what falls outside their limits (Foucault, 1977).

Power in schools is not only exercised through curriculum, but through *gaze*—through what is made visible, measured, reported. Surveillance has become a defining feature of modern schooling. From behavioural charts to biometric tracking, children are rendered knowable through data. They are continuously observed, categorised and compared. Yet Noteboom & Ross (2024) critique the assumption that datafication in education is neutral, inevitable or purely technical. This is the panoptic logic of the classroom, where the child internalises the gaze and becomes both subject and object of control. These are not only technologies of discipline, but also of affect. Children absorb the gaze of assessment and learn to govern themselves accordingly. They come to feel their own legibility or illegibility as learners. This produces not just conformity, but shame, silence and resistance. The post structural tradition teaches us that surveillance is never just about watching—it is about producing subjects. As Foucault writes, 'Visibility is a trap' (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). We must ask: who benefits from this visibility and who is rendered hyper-visible or invisible within it? Rancière's notion of the *distribution of the sensible* (Rancière, 2004, pp. 12-13) is useful here: surveillance dictates

what is seen and heard in the classroom, what is intelligible as learning and who is permitted to speak.

The manifesto proposal *we resist surveillance in all its forms* is put forward. A call Is made not only for a rejection of invasive technologies but for a reimagining of pedagogy as an opaque, fugitive, affective encounter. Drawing on Glissant's (1997) concept of *opacity*, we argue that children must be permitted their unknowability—their right to escape classification. Not every behaviour must be recorded, not every thought must be measured. There is power in the unquantifiable. Together, these two propositions form a rupture in the logic of deficit and control. They insist on a pedagogy that refuses to fix, label and scrutinise children in order to teach them. They invite us to see each learner not as a data point on a trajectory, but as a node in a complex web of relations and potentialities. This is a call for educational ethics, not compliance. For relation over regulation. For a practice of education that nurtures multiplicity without measurement.

The early architects of progressive education—such as Rousseau and Froebel explored already—offered partial resistance to this logic by recognising the individuality of the child. Rousseau's *Émile* proposed that children unfold according to their own rhythms and Froebel's vision of Kindergarten celebrated the unique symbolic expression of each learner. Yet even these visions often re-inscribed developmental norms grounded in white, able-bodied, middle-class ideals. It was Dewey, in accord with Pestalozzi, Owen and Montessori who insisted more forcefully on the educative potential of difference, arguing that democracy must include those previously marginalised from public life, including disabled children and children from working-class or immigrant families. Dewey understood education not as levelling all students into sameness, but as cultivating the conditions in which all students could find meaningful participation in shared life. Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* offered a way to view ability as relational, not fixed—a function of support and context. Montessori rejected standardised labels of ability altogether. Steiner's notion of *soul archetypes* and Malaguzzi's *hundred languages* reframed children's perceived limits as expressive multiplicities—not as symptoms of deficit but as invitations to reimagine.

Yet these philosophies sit uncomfortably within contemporary systems of education which are deeply invested in surveillance and norm-referenced standardisation. Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) frameworks, while often developed with the intention to support, frequently pathologise divergence from normed developmental trajectories (Borsay, 2012). Diagnostic categories are used to legitimise access to support but can also entrench medicalised

identities that foreclose other ways of knowing and being. The deficit model persists, implicitly suggesting that it is the child who must be repaired, rather than the system that must be restructured (for example in Ainscow, 2023). Daniels, Thompson and Tawell (2019) argue that post-Warnock SEND policy in England has generated perverse incentives that distort professional judgement and undermine inclusive practice, as accountability pressures and market logics encourage schools to manage, rather than include, students with special educational needs.

2.4.2 Regimes of classification, deficit and control in assessment

Education systems have long operated through regimes of classification—marking bodies as capable or deficient, attentive or disruptive, gifted or behind. These taxonomies are not neutral. They are rooted in historical projects of normalisation, eugenics and colonial governance, where difference was rendered a problem to be solved, a deviation to be disciplined (Quirk, 2024; Hall, 1990; Ball, 2013; Alexander, 2000). The current system of assessment operates as a technology of individualisation, comparison and competition (Alexander, 2010). The very idea of *ability* becomes bound to neoliberal logics of personal responsibility, self-regulation and performance (Ball, 2012; Webb & Kirby, 2019). Practices such as setting, streaming and behaviour-based intervention systems reproduce these logics at classroom level, reinforcing dominant norms around how a *successful* learner should behave, perform and progress.

The logic of classification becomes even more consequential when considering the labelling of neurodivergent, minoritised, economically disadvantaged and children with SEND. Evidence suggests that SEND pupils are among those most adversely affected by current assessment structures (Angliss, 2021; Azpitarte & Holt, 2024), subjected not only to academic deficit framings but to behavioural and social ones as well. The designation of ability is thus not only an educational judgment but a moral and social sorting — one that Fricker (2007) would characterise as epistemic injustice, where children's capacities to contribute meaningfully to accepted knowledge-making are structurally and constitutively undermined when appreciating a plurality of knowledge is not the current model.

Ainscow (2023) argues that 'education systems must provide a personalized educational response, rather than expecting the student to fit the system' (Ainscow, 2023, p. 1). He puts forward a request that policy makers and practitioners try 'enlarging their capacity to imagine

what might be achieved' and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about (Ainscow, 2023, p. 10). The introduction of Special Educational Needs (SEN) policies and inclusive education reflects genuine efforts to counter exclusion and support diverse learners. While UK policy frameworks emphasise inclusion and participation (DfE, 2015; Equality Act, 2010), critics argue that these intentions are frequently undermined by ableist norms, accountability pressures, and deficit-based labelling practices (Slee, 2011; Goodley, 2014). Scholars such as Norwich (2008) and Slee (2011) caution that inclusion is frequently undermined by persisting ableist ideologies within schools. Slee critiques how inclusion can become 'a policy of assimilation', whereby students are expected to conform to dominant norms rather than the system being reshaped to accommodate difference. Critical disability studies further emphasise how prevailing classroom norms and intervention logics often pathologise difference, resulting in systemic injustice that marginalises disabled children (Goodley, 2014; DfE, 2022). Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice is particularly illuminating in understanding the educational harms inflicted by early labelling of ability.

Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as a 'wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower' (p. 1) encompassing testimonial injustice—discrediting a person's voice—and hermeneutical injustice—the lack of interpretive resources. In schools, children labelled as 'low ability' or 'slow learners' often experience testimonial injustice, as their insights, questions and knowledge are devalued or ignored. This not only damages their self-concept but also limits their educational opportunities. These detrimental effects are further compounded by intersectional factors. Racially minoritised, working-class and neurodivergent children disproportionately face exclusion and negative labelling, thereby reproducing structural inequalities (Gillborn, 2008; Macdonald, 2014). This intersectional critique aligns with contemporary scholarship advocating for educational justice rooted in recognition, redistribution and representation (Collins, 2015). Such movements demand not only inclusion but a fundamental transformation of the power relations (Collins, 2021) that define notions of ability and achievement. As Slee (2018) argues, social justice in education requires challenging the norms through which learners are classified as educable or ineducable (pp. 10–14).

The construction of ability within education has historically been shaped by systems of power that classify and stratify learners, often entrenching existing inequalities. From the early adoption of standardised testing and streaming practices, 'ability' has been treated as a fixed, measurable trait that determines children's educational paths and life chances. However, referring back to Freire's assertion, these assessments are far from neutral tools; rather, they serve as mechanisms that produce and reproduce social hierarchies (Quirk, 2024). As Tomlinson

(2005) warns, such systems can mask social injustice through appeals to objectivity and fairness reinforcing exclusion rather than remedying it. Foucault's concept of surveillance and disciplinary power is instrumental in understanding how classroom routines function to regulate behaviour and categorise students according to normative standards. Foucault (1977) describes disciplinary power as 'an anatomo-politics of the human body,' (p. 139) where power operates through subtle, everyday practices of observation and normalisation. Within classrooms, this manifests through behaviour management strategies and the constant monitoring of children's conduct, which create 'docile bodies' compliant with institutional expectations. This disciplinary regime constructs 'ability' not only as cognitive capacity but also as conformity to behavioural norms, thus tightly interweaving academic and social expectations in ways that privilege some children while marginalising others.

In England, assessment within the National Curriculum is presented as a structured and rational process designed to measure progress, inform instruction and ensure accountability (DfE, 2013a). Yet even the language embedded within this policy — notably the phrase *inform instruction* rather than *inform learning* — reveals the underlying assumptions about the directionality of knowledge and the locus of control. The teacher, rather than the learner, remains central. Assessment is value-laden, high-stakes and deeply consequential (Bradbury, 2019; Wyse, Bradbury & Trollope, 2022). Assessment has become a driving force not only within pedagogy but across national and international education policy. Results feed into national league tables, influence Ofsted inspections, appear in media narratives and increasingly shape public perceptions of schools and pupils. High-stakes assessment practices, intensified by international comparisons, International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) alter practice in schools through government reactions. PISA aims to measure the pupils' Reading, Mathematical, and Scientific literacy which it is thought they will need in the future, while TIMSS aims to measure students' competence in Mathematics and Science corresponding to the countries' curricula (OECD, 2019; Mullis & Martin, 2017). It is argued that PISA and TIMSS (Mullis & Martin, 2017; Blömeke et al., 2022b), place schools under pressure to deliver measurable outcomes, often at the expense of more nuanced understandings of learning and development. There is evidence of recent changes occurring in the focus of ILSAs (Lee, 2024) and it could possibly be hoped that this could turn their action to a force of good.

As we have already discussed but choose to repeat here for emphasis, this pressure filters down to children through a tightly age-linked, linear progression model (Haynes & Murris, 2017),

culminating in a narrowing of the curriculum (Claxton, 2021), a surge in test preparation and the dominance of what Alexander (2012) calls culturally specific and developmentally inappropriate standards. Children are frequently assessed against age-related expectations that fail to account for the vast variability in social, emotional and cognitive development. The language of 'not meeting expectations' implicitly positions the learner as lacking or delayed, reinforcing a deficit narrative from an early age and a consideration of fixed ability.

Early assessment frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) and the more recent Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) contribute to this narrative by shifting Early Years pedagogy away from observation and exploration toward measurement and performativity (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Even in a context where observation could foster holistic understanding, these profiles are aggregated for national data collection, turning children's emergent learning into comparative metrics. What is presented under the banners of *inclusion* or *equity* frequently collapses under the weight of a contradictory system that labels and excludes in order to manage and sort (Heubert, 2000). As Slee (2011) and Norwich (2013) argue, inclusion cannot be realised within systems that continue to rely on ability grouping and standardised benchmarking. Rather than mitigating inequality, these structures produce and perpetuate it — often beginning in the first weeks of school.

Assessment, as currently practised, is rooted in a normative logic that identifies, measures and controls the learner through standardised metrics of performance. In his work on biopolitics, Foucault (2003) emphasised how techniques of assessment are not simply about 'measuring' individuals but are instrumental in governing their conduct. Standardised tests, grades and rankings objectify learners, reducing their lived experience and learning potential to a number or a score. This violence of assessment imposes a singular, linear view of learning that silences diverse modes of knowledge-making. We argue for a relational and narrative approach to assessment. Rather than serving as a tool of surveillance or control, assessment should become a process of co-creation, recognising the complex, multifaceted nature of learning. As Butler (1997) asserts, the act of 'becoming' is always intertwined with the social and cultural context and thus assessment must be viewed as a site of interaction, a space of mutual construction between learner, educator and community. To challenge the violence of assessment is not merely to critique its forms, but to reimagine learning itself as a process of ongoing becoming, rather than a fixed set of outcomes. In the manifesto we call for formative, narrative, relational assessment which does not judge or rank but understands and reflects. The inspiration for this proposal is explored in 2.5.4 following a critique of the surveillance which accompanies assessment in current systems, particularly powerfully in England.

2.4.3 Control and oppression in surveillance

While classification mechanisms construct the concept of 'ability' in schools, they are deeply entangled with systems of control. In line with Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary institutions, schools function as spaces of surveillance and regulation. The result is a powerful dynamic in which educational success is defined through a narrow and norm-referenced lens, while deviations from these norms are problematised, medicalised or punished.

In England, the assessment system functions as a disciplinary apparatus. From the RBA to Key Stage 2 SATs, children are positioned as data points on a pre-ordained trajectory of progress. Standardisation is imposed from the earliest stages of schooling, often under the justification of fairness, objectivity or accountability (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Yet this trajectory assumes a singular developmental path and disregards the multiplicity of ways children learn, express understanding and develop over time, which we have already critiqued in 2.2. The linear model of achievement, enforced through age expectations and developmental milestones in the current system, exerts a subtle but pervasive form of control over teachers and learners alike. Assessment becomes a driver of pedagogy, not simply a measure of learning (Clarke, 2003). Teachers are held accountable for delivering 'expected' progress within strict timeframes (Maas, Schoch & Scholz, 2021), often resulting in curriculum narrowing and a distortion of pedagogy (Au, 2007; Eggan & Stobart, 2014). As Maclure et al. (2012) argue, external teacher-led control can inhibit internal self-discipline and self-regulation — qualities purportedly valued within education policy. Berliner (2011) contends that high-stakes testing regimes systematically distort educational practice because when test results carry serious consequences for schools and teachers, it is rational for educators to prioritise. The problem, he argues, lies in the policy design, not in teacher professionalism. This professionalism has been eroded, but it should be grounded in moral purpose, critical judgement, dialogue and public responsibility (Nixon et al., 2001).

This form of surveillance is compounded by national and international comparative measures introduced in the previous section. National exams and upper-secondary assessments are important in discussions of accountability in education, but there has always been a difficulty in comparing these results internationally given that each country has its own exam system (Mullis & Martin, 2017). ILSAs were designed to be able to compare education outcomes across different nations (Beech, 2023). They have become key sources of information for educational research and policymaking. ILSAs provide information about relevant educational indicators, such as students' achievement in core domains, teachers' job satisfaction, or employees' skills in solving problems with technology. They provide information both nationally and

internationally. ILSAs are pieces in the ‘‘puzzle’ of accountability’ (Scherer & Nilsen, 2023, p. 324). Blömeke et al (2022a) state that PISA has a future perspective, focusing on what students should learn to manage their lives in future societies, while TIMSS has a retrospective perspective, measuring what students should have learned following their curricula (Blömeke et al., 2022a).

When the ILSAs first started, the position of an education system in the PISA ranking became a fundamental indicator of the quality of education system in each country. Some countries were identified as winners and others as losers (Beech, 2023). These tests therefore became high stakes tests. The identification of winners and losers meant that education policies were imposed on education systems in order that they could improve in relation to other countries. These technologies of surveillance have been through many changes. PISA now includes cross-disciplinary domains (e.g., global competence (Ozga, 2023) and provides advice to countries’ policymakers (Addey et al., 2017). TIMSS, on the other hand, provides descriptive statistics rather than correlational analyses, and does not supply advice to countries’ policymakers directly (Wagemaker, 2014). PISA takes a top-down approach, where decisions are made by expert groups and policy makers (Blömeke et al., 2022a). While TIMSS is, to a large extent, motivated by research rather than policy. ILSAs are controversial and their importance in global agendas has increased policies and changes to assessment structures in England and other countries. In 2010-2014 there was serious consideration by the English government to establish a National Curriculum which could allow England to compete with PISA high scoring countries (Alexander, 2012). Instead of policy being driven by the needs of the children in the country, they were being driven for competitive, comparable reasons (Morris, 2012). ILSAs are now central to how governments assess the ‘performance’ of education systems (Beech, 2023; Blömeke et al., 2022a). Although initially framed as tools for research and system improvement, these measures have come to define success and failure across nations. They feed into a competitive global education marketplace (Addey et al., 2017; Alexander, 2012).

Crucially, this culture of accountability and surveillance has more recently extended into the Early Years as briefly discussed in 2.4.2. Originally framed as an exploratory phase more evidently influenced by Froebel, Montessori and Reggio Emilia, Early Years education, is increasingly subject to assessment-driven performativity. Observational practices once grounded in responsive pedagogy are now rearticulated as evidence-gathering for school and national comparison (Bradbury, 2019; Melvin, Landsberg & Kagan, 2020). Within the concept of responsive pedagogy, assessment can be defined as the recursive dialogue between the learner’s internal feedback and external feedback provided by significant others. The core of

responsive pedagogy is the explicit intention of the teacher to make learners believe in their own competence and ability to meet challenges, to strengthen students' self-efficacy, and to increase their overall self-concept (Smith et al., 2016). Montessori theoretically aligns more closely to the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) than the National Curriculum since it chooses not to track pupils; it ensures individual and small group instruction and no material is tested. Teaching and empowering the whole child through self-determination is the hall mark of Montessori (Alijabreen, 2020). The Montessori teachers are trained to create culturally responsive learning environments, and the curriculum is open and expansive offering opportunities for pupils to express and explore their interests and passions (Lillard, 2023).

This cumulative process of surveillance defines a tightly bounded conception of progress and success. Children are no longer simply learning; they are being watched, judged, ranked. The implications of such a system are far-reaching: learning becomes performative, creativity is sidelined and learners internalise narrow definitions of what it means to succeed. What is constructed as evidence of learning — timed responses, isolated skill demonstrations, or high-stakes test scores — becomes the only valid form of knowledge. The implications are both epistemic and ontological. What is not measured ceases to be valued and what is valued becomes ever more constrained.

Thinking about these systems of power in education requires moving beyond visible authority to uncover the often-invisible mechanisms through which control is exercised and inequalities are reproduced. Power in schools is not confined to explicit rules or directives; rather, it is embedded in institutional practices, norms, discourses and assessment regimes that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, ability and success. The systems do not merely measure difference; they produce and reinforce hierarchies of ability that often marginalise and exclude. Moreover, power in education intersects with social categories such as race, class, gender and disability, creating layered systems of advantage and disadvantage. Recognising these systemic dynamics is essential to envisioning more just educational practices. This involves questioning who holds power, how it is exercised through 'ability' constructs and how children's identities and opportunities are shaped or constrained by these pervasive forces.

The increasing pressure on schools to meet specific performance thresholds leads to a focus on data-driven outcomes (Heissel et al., 2019; Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023). This environment is not supportive of inclusive education, since resources are diverted towards students who can meet performance standards and disruptive students are often excluded to protect the school's reputation (Lindner et al., 2023; Black et al., 2019). Schools face pressure to exclude, or *outsource* (Power, et al., 2025) students who are seen as disruptive, under the

rationale that they undermine the learning environment for other students (Eastman et al., 2011; IPPR, 2022a; Martin-Denham, 2021). This competitive, market-like dynamic in education prioritises short-term achievements over long-term and inclusive educational practices (Pennachhia & Thomson, 2016). Education and achievements (however these are defined) are heralded as predictors of future life chances. Some advocate, from equity and social justice assumptions, for 'tough love' in schools. They encourage drill and skill forms of pedagogy, such as Direct Instruction to improve attainment rates (McCollow, 2012). However, forgotten in some of these agendas is the fact that children live in the here and now and they experience life in the present not just the future. Thriving in the future may not compensate for the 'oppression' in the present.

The age-stage structure of the National Curriculum is failing many children (Thomson, 2022). They cannot reach the prescribed levels of fact recall or understanding at the expected age. This does not mean, they will never understand the concepts necessarily, but they are not given the opportunity to develop at their own rate; they are not given the time (as discussed in 2.2). They are put forward for learning support, labelled, assessed, removed from other subjects to revisit Maths and English objectives and unable to flourish. In a mixed-age structure, as proposed in the manifesto where we refuse the tyranny of age, comparison, expectations, rewards and competition. Learning environments that allow children greater autonomy, including flexibility over pacing, are more likely to support intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2.4.4 Power in the unquantifiable

A central aim of this manifesto is to reject the prevailing logic of comparison and competition that has come to dominate mainstream education, particularly through the mechanisms of standardised, summative assessment. Children are expected to 'act their age' (Lesko, 2012). We challenge its violence. Such practices foster a culture in which children are routinely ranked, measured and positioned against their peers — a process that not only advances anxiety and self-doubt, but actively undermines collective learning. Rather than supporting children to explore knowledge collaboratively and appreciate diverse perspectives, the current system promotes individualism, norm-referenced achievement and narrow success metrics. This manifesto proposes a radical reorientation: one that centres collaboration, mutual respect and the co-construction of knowledge. It seeks to shift children's attention away from outperforming others and towards engaging in dialogue, building understanding and embracing

the complexity and richness of multiple viewpoints. Education, in this vision, becomes not a race to the top, but a shared journey of curiosity, creativity and community.

In light of these critiques, the thesis does not merely call for a reform of assessment practices but argues for their radical transformation. It joins scholars, educators, campaigners and learners in rejecting the surveillance-based, deficit-oriented and control-driven mechanisms that define current assessment systems in England. These systems are not simply flawed in practice; they are unjust in principle. Power lies in the unquantifiable — in stories, silences, questions and collaborations that escape reductive capture. This alternative vision entails the rejection of deficit and labelling, including the abolition of high-stakes summative assessments in the primary years, where the harms are most acute. Testing children at age four or six and defining them by what they cannot do contradicts ethical commitments to equity.

Instead, it is purported that, assessment must be formative, multimodal and collaborative. Drawing from the philosophies of Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Waldorf, assessment becomes a practice of listening, documentation and relational engagement - music, movement, visual art, storytelling and dialogue —assessment shifts from control to creativity. Instead of comparative data-driven league tables and policy shifts, shared documentation and professional networks can promote supportive dialogue between schools, educators and communities (Tisdall, 2020). These alternatives do not reject evidence or accountability — rather, they advocate for methods that are humane, meaningful and pedagogically sound. Lillejord (2023) point toward ‘more intelligent’ approaches that rely more on professional judgment, learning focused improvement and trust-based system design rather than narrow metrics. Professional trust must be restored. England’s model of external accountability contrasts starkly with high trust systems such as those in Scandinavia (Stobart, 2021) where teachers are trusted to assess holistically, responsively and in partnership with families (Smith et al., 2016).

Cossentino, (2005) recorded how at the start of a child’s Montessori learning journey, even if children have reached a level of independence which allows them to work without requiring help on what to do or how to do it, they will still come to the teacher to ask if they have done it well. The teacher in Montessori is encouraged to reassure with a smile, but nothing more. ‘If [the adult] does less than is necessary, the child cannot act meaningfully, and if he does more than is necessary, he imposes himself on the child, extinguishing creative impulses’ (Montessori, 2020, p. 154) The description Cossentino (2005) gives of an exchange she witnessed between a learner and the teacher in the Montessori classroom explains how the calm, warm, quiet words facilitate not only the learners progress in a concept, but the fact that no praise or criticism is made, facilitates the child’s internal motivation. They do not learn and make progress to please

the teacher. When the child learns naturally it gives them pleasure. In research exploring the difference between children in mainstream and Montessori schools, Denervaud et al. (2020) found that Montessori children seem to engage more productively with errors rather than valuing correct answers provided by their teachers. The authors contend that the findings add to the discussions of internally derived, sensory learning and externally derived, value-based learning that is fundamental to the extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation dichotomy. In Montessori schools some elements are crucial for developing a child's concentration and fostering independent learning. These include a cycle of activity, self-chosen engagement, uninterrupted focus, and the responsibility of setting up and cleaning up (Marshall, 2017).

The extrinsic motivators used in traditional schooling can be motivating for some children and these children are the beneficiaries of the current education system in England. However, not all children can achieve the praise, grades, certificates and prizes and they are faced with failure regularly in their very formative years (Basargekar & Lillard, 2023). The English National Curriculum creates environments where children are constantly in competition with each other (De Fraja & Landeras, 2006). Research shows that mixed age in Montessori schools promotes peer learning, social interaction and a sense of familial community rather than comparison and competition (Lillard, 2005). Reggio Emilia models also aim to build a strong sense of community and collaboration, which is arguably not possible if the environment is based on unfair comparisons and competition (Edwards, 2002).

Formative assessment or Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been promoted in England since the late 1990s, following the influential work of Black and Wiliam (1998) and subsequent initiatives such as the Assessment Reform Group's *10 Principles* (2002). While AfL emerged from a robust evidence base demonstrating the learning benefits of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998), its translation into policy and practice through *Inside the Black Box* (Black & Wiliam, 2001) and subsequent implementation often reduced complex pedagogical principles to techniques, a tendency later critiqued by Black and Wiliam themselves (2018). While widely taken up by teachers at the level of classroom practice, AfL has not achieved systemic prominence (Wiliam, 2011). Bourke (2016) argues that performative assessment regimes and high stakes accountability limits the liberatory potential of self-assessment. Her work strengthens the argument that assessment should contribute to human flourishing, not merely performance optimisation. Assessment should be dialogic, negotiated, socially mediated. Bennett (2011) offers a critical review of formative assessment, arguing that its conceptual ambiguity and absorption into summative accountability systems have led to overstated claims of impact and weakened its potential to support learning. Summative assessment continues to

dominate the landscape, shaped by national testing, league tables and inspection frameworks. Bourke (2016) argues that self-assessment can be a genuinely By contrast, Scandinavian countries have integrated formative principles more coherently into pedagogy (Erstad & Siddiq, 2023). Their practices align with *Assessment as Learning* (AaL), which places learners at the centre of assessment, encouraging reflection, self-regulation and agency (Dann, 2002). These approaches are reinforced by cultural and structural factors: high levels of teacher autonomy, holistic curricular priorities and reduced emphasis on high-stakes testing.

In England, however, attempts to shift towards more formative and holistic models are often championed outside government policy by reform movements such as *More Than a Score* (see article by Hanson, 2022) and *Rethinking Assessment*. These coalitions of parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers argue that the current system narrows the curriculum, increases stress, and misdirects schools' priorities. Berliner (2011) contends that the system rewards this behaviour. The reform movements call for reduced reliance on standardised testing, greater teacher autonomy and assessment that supports the 'whole child'. Prominent advocates such as Alison Peacock, Sir Kenneth Baker, and Priya Lakhani argue for a fundamental rebalancing of assessment towards continuous, formative feedback rather than 'permanent stamps' of summative judgement. The persistence of such campaign groups underscores a paradox: while Scandinavian systems structurally support formative assessment (Gamlem & Vattoy, 2023), in England it survives largely at the classroom level or in the discourse of reformers, constrained by systemic accountability pressures (Wiliam, 2011) and the implicit normalisation of the marketisation of assessment seen in teacher guides such as that written by Anwyll & Clements' (2016). Thus, AfL in England remains a marginalised practice, its potential curtailed (Stobart, 2021). Andersson and Palm (2018) show that teachers' sustained engagement with formative assessment depends less on technical training than on motivation grounded in autonomy, competence, and professional meaning, with reform faltering where practice is driven by compliance rather than pedagogical purpose. Finland illustrates how, in contexts where formative assessment is structurally and culturally supported, it can flourish as a genuine model of learning rather than a supplement to testing (Sahlberg, 2011).

Formative assessment not only supports academic progress but also broadens opportunities for pupil voice and creativity. Kirby (2019) argues that it enables children to 'speak out' and express understanding in multiple ways, echoing Reggio Emilia's *Hundred Voices* concept. This approach values diverse forms of expression—words, art, movement, music, and play—as legitimate means of communication (Edwards, 2012). In such models, assessment becomes an act of attentive listening, with teachers observing children's varied expressions and providing

culturally responsive feedback to sustain learning conversations (Sisson, Whitington & Shin, 2020). Documentation practices in Reggio-inspired settings further capture children's voices through photographs, videos and observations (Alijabreen, 2020). Freed from the pressures of summative examinations, pupils engage in exploratory, project-based, and cross-curricular learning, assessed through dialogue and collaboration (Deluca & Hughes, 2014; Lillard, 2021). Interviews with children in these contexts highlight openness, creativity and sensory engagement, in contrast to the 'sitting and listening' described by pupils in mainstream state schools (Kirby, 2019). In Montessori classrooms, formative assessment is intrinsic to pedagogy. Autodidactic materials encourage self-correction and reflection (Cossentino, 2005), while teacher–pupil dialogue supports collaborative goal-setting and self-assessment (Edwards, 2002). Crucially, children's work is never ranked or graded but valued as part of an ongoing learning journey (Cossentino, 2006).

Special schools, some Early Years settings and Alternative Provisions (APs) also highlight how formative and child-centred assessment can operate outside the strictures of summative testing. In these contexts, education is typically organised around personalised learning plans and responsive interventions rather than adherence to fixed developmental stage models (Pennacchia & Thomson, 2016). Play-based and emergent curricula in Early Years education, for example, foreground the child's holistic development—emotional, social, cognitive and physical—while acknowledging the variability and fluidity of early growth (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Similarly, APs prioritise immediate needs and personalised support (Murray, 2021; Clarke & Thompson, 2024), ensuring that assessment reflects the lived realities of learners rather than fitting them into a predetermined developmental trajectory. The deficit model, which characterises learners as 'behind' or 'in need of intervention,' is one of the most pervasive yet harmful elements in the current educational system. This model positions difference as something to be fixed, a problem to be overcome, rather than recognising difference as a valid epistemological stance in its own right, as discussed in 2.4. This is a direct manifestation of what Foucault (1977) describes as biopower, wherein individuals (in this case, learners) are categorised and normalised according to dominant standards. Those who deviate from the norm are subjected to corrective practices that aim to render them more compliant to educational and societal expectations.

In the manifesto we propose to honour difference. We challenge the pathologising view of divergence. As theorists like Irigaray (1993) and Foucault (1977) have argued, the politics of difference require an ethical reorientation: difference is not deviance, but a fundamental condition of human experience and plural knowledges (Butler, 1990). We advocate for an

educational framework that sees difference as constitutive, rather than a deficiency to be corrected. This reframing involves recognising neurodiversity, disability and cultural variations as forms of knowledge production that challenge normative boundaries and enrich the learning process.

Education as a whole must move beyond the medical or deficit model, which positions the learner as a problem to be diagnosed, managed or remediated. Instead, we propose a relational and intra-active model (Barad, 2007), in which difference is entangled with environment, pedagogy, materiality and affect. It is not a separate domain of practice, but a reminder of the heterogeneity always already present in all learning spaces. Drawing on the work of scholars like Goodley (2014) and Tourigny, Plante and Raby (2020), we envision SEND as a space for political imagination: a place to reconfigure what counts as communication, expression, participation and intelligence. Angliss (2021) argues that SEND research has too often reduced children to categories or interventions, and calls instead for a relational, ethically grounded approach in which research informs but does not supplant professional judgement or the lived experience of individual children. Instead, we resist narrow psychometric categorisations and instead embrace alternative literacies, embodied knowledges, sensory learning and multimodal storytelling. Difference becomes a pedagogical resource, not a detour from the 'mainstream'. Crucially, the vision does not dismiss the reality that some learners require specialist equipment, sensory environments, communication aids or essential medical care. The education system must not be reluctant to provide these, nor to acknowledge that some children require environments that are physically, socially and emotionally attuned to their individual needs (Merrigan & Senior 2023; Kauffman et al., 2022). Drawing on the example of well-resourced special schools, we advocate for a universal commitment to providing such resources across educational contexts — without isolating or pathologising the children who need them. Inclusion does not demand sameness; it demands responsiveness. It needs to be relational and negotiated (Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2024). Inclusion can be built through collective knowledge mobilisation, democratic participation and reflective practice (Moliner et al., 2021). Where possible, the vision hopes for the blurring of boundaries between special and mainstream settings — not necessarily by sharing identical buildings, but by cohabiting shared outdoor spaces, collaborating across institutions and co-constructing learning that values difference as vital. Such outdoor spaces offer possibilities for cross-pollination of ideas, encounters with difference and shared projects that disrupt the binary of ‘special’ versus ‘mainstream’. This is not an attempt to collapse all difference into one model but to recognise that educational justice must hold space for both common ground and differentiated care. It is

an ethics of flexibility, plurality and attentiveness — a commitment to building systems that meet all learners not where we expect them to be, but where they are.

2.4.5 Conclusion

Section 2.4 built upon the critical exploration of curriculum and knowledge to examine the intertwined concepts of power and ability within educational settings, foregrounding justice as articulated by theorists such as Fricker (2007). This section investigated how educational systems have historically constructed and perpetuated notions of ability through mechanisms like standardised testing and streaming, which often reinforce inequalities and marginalisation. Drawing on Foucault's theories of surveillance and disciplinary power, it considered how classroom routines and behaviour management practices enact subtle but pervasive forms of control. The discussion then turned to debates around inclusive education in the primary years, with insights from scholars including Tomlinson, Norwich (see Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Norwich and Black, 2015) and Slee, highlighting how early labelling of 'ability' influences children's self-concept, access to opportunities and educational trajectories. Incorporating critical disability studies perspectives, this section critiques dominant classroom norms and intervention logics that sustain systemic injustice and asks how schools might move towards genuinely equitable practices that recognise and value diverse abilities. In line with this critique, the manifesto calls for the abolition of standardised, summative, reported assessments and a fundamental review of what progress means and how it is measured. It embraces and historicises arguments in favour of formative assessment, aiming not simply to replace one flawed system with another but to remove the existing assessment structures altogether and implement meaningful measures that truly support children's growth and flourishing. Assessment can never be entirely apolitical. It always reflects what society values and what it seeks to produce through its education systems. As Maxwell (2023) notes, it is both a driver of what is learned and a signifier of what is valued. The current system values conformity, measurability and performance. A just system would value curiosity, connection and collective flourishing. Schools could be spaces of freedom where educators are free to use their imagination and all learners free to explore without fear of failure or observation.

If the question of ability interrogates *who* is permitted to learn and *how* their learning is recognised, the question of space and relationality asks *where* learning happens, *with whom* it unfolds and *what forms of connection* are made possible or foreclosed by our current educational architectures.

2.5 Space and relationality

2.5.1 Space – physical, social and emotional

Section 2.5 positions space and relationality at the very centre of teaching and learning. Education is never merely the transmission of knowledge; it is the production of social worlds, shaped by the spatial and relational conditions under which it occurs. Considering Freire's proclamation yet further and more specifically - classrooms, corridors and playgrounds are not neutral backdrops but sites charged with pedagogical, political and cultural significance. When pupils are afforded time and space to self-regulate, exercise agency and progress at their own rhythms—rather than being measured against the standardised pace of age-based cohorts—research shows they are more likely to experience belonging and positive engagement (Nind et al., 2012; Tellis-James & Fox, 2016). Such findings unsettle the assumption that comparison and competition are natural or necessary features of schooling. This section therefore interrogates the spatial organisation of classrooms, the dynamics of teacher–pupil relations and the quotidian structures of school life as forces that actively shape learners' experiences and identities. Drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy, it examines how educational space becomes a terrain of enclosure, separation and control, as well as a potential site of liberation, collaboration and becoming. The manifesto envisions community-embedded education: outdoor classrooms, local projects, intergenerational partnerships and democratic participation grounded in mutual recognition, dialogue, trust and ethical attentiveness in line with Haynes and Suissa's (2022) understanding.

Mainstream schooling in England has long been spatially structured by the logics of enclosure, separation and control. Children are sorted into classrooms by age and ability, physically contained within buildings that are often severed from their ecological, cultural and community contexts. Such spatial ordering reflects Enlightenment ideals of mastery over nature, the separation of mind and body, and the privileging of abstract knowledge over situated experience (Hamilton & Zufiaurre, 2014). Yet this has never been the only vision of education. Across the history of progressive thought, we see recurring challenges to enclosure. Rousseau placed the child in nature to develop according to their own rhythms—not as a proto-ecologist, but as one who recognised that learning is always shaped by environment. Pestalozzi insisted on education embedded in lived context. Froebel's gardens were literal pedagogical spaces, where children engaged with the material world in sensory and symbolic ways. Dewey's schools were to be microcosms of democratic society, physically open to community and responsive to experience. Montessori reorganised classrooms to centre autonomy, mobility and purposeful

interaction with materials. Steiner's environments were infused with rhythm and aesthetics. Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia approach named the environment, in particular light, the outdoors, windows, as the 'third teacher,' co-constructing meaning alongside the child and the adult. Each of these traditions foregrounded the pedagogical force of space.

Despite such legacies, contemporary schooling frequently ignores the significance of *place* (Dunkley, 2018), treating space as neutral infrastructure. In this way, schools become detached from land, perpetuating what Orr (2004) calls *ecological illiteracy*: a failure not simply of knowledge, but of relationship. 'All education is environmental education. By what is included or excluded, students are taught that they are part of—or apart from—the natural world' (Orr, 2004 p. 12). From decolonial and Indigenous perspectives, this detachment is not merely pedagogical but profoundly political. Colonial schooling systematically erased Indigenous knowledge systems rooted in land, seasonality, kinship and reciprocity. Education was wielded as a tool of land dispossession and cultural erasure. To learn 'apart from land' is therefore to participate, often unwittingly, in ongoing coloniality insofar as colonial education abstracts knowledge from place, relation and territory (Qureshi 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Simpson, 2017). The manifesto therefore declares we must learn with land, not apart from it. This is not a nostalgic return but a generative proposition. Learning with land demands an ontological reorientation. It recognises knowledge as emerging from place, from sensory engagement, interdependence and embodied relation. It challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and acknowledges the more-than-human world as co-participant in education. Influenced by place-based pedagogies, Indigenous traditions and post humanist theories, this call demands that we reconsider the very boundaries of the classroom (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Azano & Stewart, 2015). Azano and Stewart (2015) argue that rural education requires place-conscious and justice-oriented pedagogy, showing that standardised and urban-normed approaches misrecognise rural communities and undermine both educational relevance and social equity. We argue that primary schools rural or urban must reclaim gardens, forests and communities as sites of inquiry. It means resisting the sanitised enclosures of neoliberal schooling and opening schools to weather, soil and story.

Closely linked to this is a third manifesto proposition: we declare learning to be relational. The Cartesian subject—the solitary thinker abstracted from others—has long underpinned Euro-Western models of education. Yet philosophy and pedagogy have consistently shown otherwise. Vygotsky framed learning as social first, internal second (Derry, 2013). Malaguzzi saw knowledge as created through encounter, through listening and co-construction. Contemporary

theorists such as Barad and Haraway extend this relationality to material and affective worlds: learning is not simply dialogue between humans, but entanglement between bodies, tools, spaces and histories. 'Relationality is not a feature of existence; it is existence' (Barad, 2007, p. 136). To declare learning as relational is therefore radical. It resists the logics of standardisation, competition and individual achievement. It foregrounds affect, interdependence and mutual transformation. It compels us to ask: Who is included in the learning encounter? Whose voices are heard? What forms of connection are valued—or ignored?

Together, these propositions resist the spatial, ontological and epistemological fragmentation of mainstream education. They call us to reimagine the school not as a closed system, but as an unfolding ecology of relation. They remind us that where we learn—and with whom—shapes what we come to know and who we become. These are not mere pedagogical preferences; they are ethical commitments. They demand schools that are porous, place-aware and reciprocal. They demand that we dismantle the walls, both literal and figurative, that divide us from one another and from the living world. The work undertaken next, therefore explores how enclosure, separation and control are enacted in current school structures, and how alternative practices can transform the very 'space' of schooling.

2.5.1.1 Enclosure

The classroom is never a neutral container. Its layout, furniture, displays and spatial practices communicate implicit messages about power, agency and belonging. Traditional classroom design—rows of desks facing the teacher, walls covered in prescriptive displays—mirrors the disciplinary logic of the institutions that produced it. As discussed in 2.4, in Foucault's analysis of panoptic structures (1977), the classroom becomes a site of visibility where children are not only seen but shaped by the gaze that watches them. Enclosure here is not simply physical; it is ideological, embedding logics of uniformity, control and surveillance into the everyday fabric of schooling. This thesis echoes the long politics of enclosure—from the appropriation of common land in the eighteenth century to the privatisation of intellectual, social and emotional commons in contemporary schooling. The spatial regulation of the classroom can thus be read as a continuation of those earlier economic and political processes: what was once the fencing of fields becomes the partitioning of minds. Both forms of enclosure operate through dispossession—of land, of time, of voice—and both secure compliance through spatial and temporal discipline. As Linebaugh (2014) reminds us, important political nouns are often used as or become verbs, in which case enclosure can become a continuous process of exclusion that

redefines freedom as containment. Within education, this manifests as the ownership of learning by the institution rather than the learner, and as the conversion of curiosity into measurable productivity. Yet enclosure has always been contested. Rousseau proclaimed that *real* education could only occur outside in nature and Owen believed that a person's character and productivity were shaped by their environment. The juxtaposition of the natural wonder of the Falls of Clyde, a famous destination on the Grand Tour, a tradition that attracted wealthy and influential visitors to the area, with the innovative industrial community was a powerful symbol of his vision. Forest Schools and outdoor learning initiatives push further, displacing the classroom altogether by centring risk, autonomy and embodied interaction with the more-than-human world. Small rural and urban schools, like those studied by Dennison (1972), show how multi-age, community-embedded education creates intimacy, continuity and a more human scale of schooling. Home-schooling, special schools and alternative provision likewise disrupt the presumption that *real* education must occur inside standardised classrooms.

These alternatives demonstrate that enclosure is not inevitable. When freed from rigid timetables, assessment regimes and spatial constraints, education becomes more responsive to children's diverse rhythms, capacities and interests (Forlin, Chambers & Banks, 2023). However, they are not without risk. Alternative pedagogies can themselves become rigid (Edmunds, 2004), reproducing new forms of enclosure under the guise of freedom. The manifesto therefore declares that enclosure must be undone. This logic of enclosure echoes the politics of land enclosure from the eighteenth century onwards, in which common spaces were fenced, regulated and redefined as property—transformations that reorganised social life through control, separation and loss of shared agency (Thompson, 1963). Classrooms should not be sites of surveillance and control, but environments that open onto possibility. Education must resist the architecture of uniformity and cultivate spaces that are porous, flexible and relational. To dismantle enclosure is to reimagine schools as environments that foster agency, creativity and belonging—not through containment, but through connection.

If enclosure confines learners within predetermined boundaries, separation intensifies the logic by dividing and categorising them. Enclosure sets the wall; separation draws the lines within them. It is the practice of sorting—by age, ability, diagnosis or space—that fragments learning and fractures belonging. Where enclosure disciplines through visibility, separation organises through division. The following section therefore examines how educational systems partition children, knowledge and experience, and what it means to resist these fragmentations.

2.5.1.2 Separation

Separation is one of the most enduring and consequential logics of schooling. Children are routinely divided by age, sex, ability and diagnosis; learning is segmented into subjects, times and spaces; classrooms are organised to mark the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. These divisions are not accidental. They are ideological practices that produce hierarchies of ability, fragment experience and stabilise the binary between those who are deemed to fit and those who are rendered marginal or excluded. While the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008) asserts inclusive education as a fundamental right—demanding that children with disabilities participate fully within shared educational communities—separation remains deeply embedded in practice. Specialist resources such as therapy pools, sensory rooms and adapted play equipment, though invaluable, are typically confined to special schools, reinforcing segregation rather than prompting a reimagining of how such environments might enrich learning for all children (Kauffman et al., 2023; Petrus et al., 2008; Gourley et al., 2013; Waller et al., 2017). Inclusive design, by contrast, holds the potential to transform mainstream schooling from a system of sorting into one of shared belonging.

Spatial organisation further entrenches this logic. Rows of desks—or even collaborative arrangements that remain desk-bound—signal that learning is contained, surveyed and primarily cognitive (Atasoy, Özdemir & Evli, 2023). This is not to deny that learning can be difficult or demanding; indeed, education has long been understood as agonistic, involving struggle, effort and uncertainty (Biesta, 2017; Mouffe, 2009). What is at stake, however, is the assumption that struggle must occur within rigid spatial and temporal constraints. Alternative arrangements demonstrate otherwise. Alongside Engelmann (2022) we caution here against romanticising alternatives as inherently emancipatory, these ‘sites of experimentation’ are not automatic solutions to systemic problems but offer interference, other thinking, consideration, opportunity. Mixed-age classrooms in Montessori education reduce the pressure of age-based expectations and foster social reciprocity and belonging (Edwards, 2002; Lillard, 2023). Early years settings and Forest Schools similarly disrupt entrenched binaries, offering autonomy, sensory engagement and forms of play that formal classrooms often suppress (Dabaja, 2021; Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019). Yet even these practices remain marginal in England, where outdoor provision is mandated only for under-fives (DfES, 2006), and efforts to integrate Forest School pedagogies into mainstream education are constrained by time, resources and accountability regimes (Rios, Neilson & Menezes, 2021).

Separation also operates through a persistent division between learning and nature. Outdoor education, where it exists, is often treated as supplementary rather than foundational, reflecting a modernist dualism that positions human knowledge as separate from—and superior to—the non-human world (Latour, 2004). This manifesto rejects such binaries as it rejects the unstable binaries of normal/abnormal, child/adult relied upon in psychological concepts (Morss, 1992). Drawing on new materialist and post humanist thought, it affirms learning as an embodied, ecological practice in which the material world participates in the production of knowledge (Bennett, 2010). Learning with land—rather than apart from it—foregrounds sensory engagement, reciprocity and responsibility within more-than-human worlds. Children's sustained interest in climate justice and environmental futures underscores the urgency of this orientation.

Although place-based pedagogies are rarely foregrounded in educational theory (with Ritchie et al., 2010 a notable exception), European early childhood traditions carry a long, if often unexamined, legacy of education-in-nature. Rousseau's romantic alignment of childhood, nature and learning shaped Froebel's kindergarten and continues to echo through contemporary Forest Schools and nature kindergartens in Scandinavia, Northern Europe and the UK (Warden, 2007, 2010). Molyneux, Zeni & Oberle (2022) demonstrate how outdoor, child-led learning supports social and emotional development, autonomy and engagement in learning. These environments value extended time outdoors and are grounded in culturally specific ontologies, particularly within Nordic contexts (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006). Yet romanticised notions of the 'natural child' risk reinscribing innocence, universality and exclusion (Taylor, 2011). Drawing instead on Haraway's (2004) and Massey's (2006) relational ethics, this thesis advances a common worlds pedagogy: one that emphasises responsibility, reciprocity and the formation of 'questioning relationships' within shared human and more-than-human worlds. The Aotearoa/New Zealand context demonstrates how Indigenous ecological principles can inform pedagogies of sustainability grounded in care for self, others and environment (Ritchie et al., 2010), reminding us that place-based education is always situated, political and shaped by educators' own histories and locations (Somerville, 2007a). Recent UK scholarship similarly calls for sustainability education that confronts colonial histories of land use and environmental exploitation, advocating instead for decolonial, justice-oriented pedagogies rooted in relational accountability (Dunkley & Smith, 2022).

Separation is not only spatial but conceptual. Formal learning is routinely opposed to play, imagination and creativity, despite extensive evidence that play is foundational to cognitive,

social and emotional development (Vygotsky, 1978). While Finland recognises play as intrinsically valuable, education systems in England and Australia tend to instrumentalise it as a means to predetermined outcomes (Melvin, Landsberg & Kagan, 2020). Such divisions deny children access to some of the most powerful modes of inquiry and meaning-making available to them (Wrigley, 2019). The manifesto therefore declares that separation must be dismantled. Learning cannot be meaningfully divided into rigid categories of age, ability, subject, space or activity. Forests, therapy pools, sensory rooms, stories, simulations and streets are not curricular add-ons but integral elements of a holistic, relational pedagogy. To resist separation is to affirm belonging and to insist that children learn not apart from one another, but together.

If enclosure confines and separation divides, control governs what remains inside. Control operates through timetables, assessment regimes, behaviour policies and the subtle regulation of movement, speech and attention. It is not simply disciplinary but atmospheric, shaping the tempo and texture of everyday school life. Behaviour policies, silent corridors, seating plans and uniform codes function as spatial technologies of compliance, rendering conformity visible and deviation punishable. From a poststructuralist perspective, classrooms are always already sites of discipline. Foucault's (1977) account of disciplinary power reveals how schooling produces self-regulating subjects who internalise the gaze of surveillance (Rose, 2009). Yet space is never neutral. As Gislason (2007) notes, it both reflects and shapes social relations. Flexible, child-centred environments can open possibilities for democratic interaction and agency (Fielding, 2004), though without structural change, spaces that are deliberately created, continuously sustained and carefully protected (Haynes & Suissa, 2022) risk remaining aesthetic gestures layered onto unchanged power relations.

The manifesto therefore declares that education must move beyond control. Schools cannot be organised around authority and compliance but must become communities of cohabitation and co-creation, where difference is welcomed, autonomy honoured and care normalised (Louis, 2010). To undo control is not to invite chaos, but to design learning environments in which joy, responsibility and mutual trust coexist. It is here that relationality becomes central. Relational education recognises learners as interconnected beings whose identities, voices and agency are inseparable from the spaces, materials and communities in which learning unfolds (Collins, 2013). By centring relationality, the manifesto turns from critique to possibility—asking how educational spaces might support interdependence, nurture meaningful relationships and enable collective flourishing across human and more-than-human worlds (Massey, 2006).

2.5.2 Relationality

Human beings are inherently relational. We come into being through our entanglements with others, with places and with the more-than-human world. In contemporary conditions shaped by movement, displacement and ecological crisis, these relations are increasingly strained, uneven and politicised. How we learn to live together—across difference, uncertainty and environmental precarity—has become one of the most urgent ethical and political questions of our time. The future of the planet, and of generations to come, depends on how these relations are cultivated and sustained (Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

Relationality offers a counter-principle to the fragmenting logics of enclosure, separation and control. Where enclosure confines and separation divides, relationality insists on connection, interdependence and co-creation. Learning is never an isolated act; it emerges through interaction, care and shared responsibility. Dewey (2004) recognised that human plasticity need not produce individualism but can foster recognised interdependence, forming the basis of democratic life. Noddings (2005a, 2005b) extends this insight, framing teaching as a moral practice grounded in reciprocal care. Relational pedagogies therefore ask not only what is taught, but how relationships are structured: whose voices matter, how power circulates, and how everyday routines and spatial arrangements shape the emotional and ethical climate of schooling.

The concept of common worlds offers a way of thinking relationally without collapsing difference into sameness. Rather than treating community as a static or harmonious entity, common worlds emphasise the active work of assembling, negotiating and sustaining shared life. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblages, this perspective foregrounds generative, reconstructive thinking over abstraction or consensus. Communities—whether neighbourhoods, early childhood settings or cultural groupings—are constituted through shared practices, mutual interests and collective responsibilities (Taylor & Giugni, 2012). As Gibson-Graham (2006) argues, an ethical practice of commons management not only produces shared substance but continually reopens the question of who belongs and who is entitled to participate in decision-making.

Relationality is also ecological. Education has long been structured by human-centred assumptions that position knowledge as detached from land, materiality and place. Yet learning is always situated. Kimmerer (2013) reminds us that knowledge is a gift that carries obligations—

to land, to ancestors and to future generations. To learn is to enter relations of reciprocity. Barad (2017) similarly argues that relation is not a property of pre-existing entities but the condition of their becoming. From this perspective, education that remains severed from environment is not merely incomplete but ethically diminished. Relational pedagogy therefore extends beyond the interpersonal to include land, materials and the more-than-human world as participants in learning (Halle-Erby, 2024).

Relationality is spatial and political. Schools are not neutral containers but constellations of relations, shaped by power and history (Massey, 1993, 2000). Architecture, classroom layouts and playgrounds materially structure possibilities for care, agency and belonging. Conventional schooling, with its hierarchical, age-banded organisation, often limits co-agency and mutual responsibility. In contrast, scholars such as hooks (1994) frame care and mutual recognition as political acts, envisioning classrooms as communities of resistance where power is shared and identity acknowledged. Fielding (2004) extends this through the notion of radical collegiality, dissolving rigid hierarchies and positioning learners and teachers as co-participants in ethical, dialogic communities.

These contemporary insights build on longer relational traditions. Pestalozzi and Froebel grounded education in trust, play and empathetic connection. Montessori reconfigured environments to support autonomy and respectful guidance. Reggio Emilia pedagogy radicalises relationality further, positioning children as protagonists and teachers as researchers, with learning understood as collective inquiry. Vygotsky similarly demonstrates that cognition emerges socially, through guided participation. Important critiques remain: Noddings has been challenged for idealising gendered care (Lynch et al., 2009), Montessori for underplaying creative disorder (Lillard, 2005), and hooks for the difficulties of radical openness within policy-driven systems. Yet these limitations do not negate the central insight that education is fundamentally relational.

This manifesto therefore declares relationality as a foundational principle of educational design. Learning environments must foreground care, dialogue and interdependence. Teachers are not enforcers of compliance but companions and co-learners; children are not passive recipients but active participants in shared worlds of meaning. Relational spaces disrupt the hierarchies and fragmentations of conventional schooling and open possibilities for collective flourishing. Arthur, Goodman and Clemente (2025) propose that education needs this more anthropological perspective – drawing on culture, society and history can make sense of

flourishing more fully. To declare learning as relational is also to move beyond narrow models of inclusion. Azorín and Ainscow (2020) argue that inclusion is a continuous, context-sensitive process grounded in school culture, professional collaboration and shared values, and that it is undermined when accountability systems prioritise narrow performance measures over participation and belonging. Rather than treating schools as bounded spaces populated by pre-defined differences requiring accommodation, relationality invites us to think in more dynamic terms—of actively assembling commonalities and responsibilities (Latour, 2004). This extends inclusion beyond the human. When we recognise ourselves as belonging within human and more-than-human common worlds, our ethical responsibilities are reframed. Relations become generative encounters through which we become—and continue to become—who we are.

Relationality thus illuminates interdependence. The next section, on voice and agency, turns to its ethical enactment: who is heard, who is authorised to act, and how power moves through pedagogical encounters. From the ecology of land and place, the argument now turns to the embodied subjectivities of learners and educators—how they speak, resist, co-create and lead.

2.6 Voice and agency

If relationality reveals the interdependence that underpins all learning, voice and agency illuminate how that interdependence is enacted. Relational spaces create the conditions for connection, but they do not automatically ensure that every learner's perspectives, questions or ideas are taken seriously. To move from relational awareness to ethical practice, education must recognise children as active co-authors of knowledge, capable of shaping the very structures and content of their learning. Relationality emphasises that all learning emerges in networks of interaction—between children, teachers, peers, materials and environments. Voice and agency ask us to attend to whose contributions are visible, validated and acted upon, and whose remain marginalised. They invite a rethinking of authority: from adult-directed, hierarchical control to shared responsibility and co-creation (Murray, 2017). In this sense, voice and agency are not optional enhancements; they are the ethical and pedagogical enactment of relationality itself. This frames the manifesto's commitment: to trust children not merely to participate, but to lead, influence and co-construct their educational experiences. It is a shift from seeing learners as objects to recognising them as subjects whose curiosity, dissent and creativity are vital to the life of the classroom. From relationality flows agency, from agency

flows the transformative potential of education as a democratic, ethical and co-created practice.

The manifesto proposes that children are not objects of education; they are active, agentic participants and co-collaborators in the construction of knowledge. Learning emerges in spaces where children's questions, theories, curiosities and dissent are treated with seriousness, as discussed in 2.3. Children need to be encouraged to question everything in order that we can safeguard against relational pedagogies falling prey to the shadow side of relationships: domination; demagoguery undue influence; dependency; coercive control; cult followings; sexual exploitation. Education must trust children to co-author curricula, reinterpret and reimagine the world alongside adults. It must also keep children safe by listening to them and giving them the space and courage to speak up about everything. The conventional image of the child in education has been shaped by developmentalist and hierarchical thought: Rousseau's 'not-yet-rational' child, Piaget's stages of cognitive readiness as critiqued in 2.2. While protective in intent, these theories often frame children as incomplete subjects—objects rather than participants in learning. Yet Rousseau proposed that learning must unfold through experience, not prescription. Pestalozzi, Froebel and Owen advanced the view that children are curious, intuitive and capable of moral reasoning when met with care and dignity. Dewey reinforced this with democratic, dialogic education and Montessori designed environments to enable self-directed learning. Steiner privileged autonomy, imagination and moral development. Across these traditions, the child is rich in potential, competent and connected to others (Malaguzzi, 1998).

This philosophical lineage underpins the manifesto's call: we trust children to lead. This is not a naïve reversal of roles or romanticisation of childhood; it is a political and ethical stance. Rancière (1991) dismantles intellectual hierarchy in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, asserting the equality of intelligences. Feminist and poststructuralist perspectives (e.g. Butler) show that subjectivity is emergent through relational, material and discursive encounters. Trusting children to lead means creating pedagogical spaces where questions, dissent and curiosity are central; where children shape the conditions of their learning; where they co-author curricula and interpret the world alongside adults.

Such a vision requires rejecting the myth of the neutral teacher. Professional discourses often frame neutrality as virtue, especially in performative, standards-driven systems. Yet neutrality is ideological: it erases teacher subjectivity, silences ethical commitments and maintains the status quo (Freire, 1972; Foucault, 1977). A pedagogy of presence, as advocated by hooks

(1994), demands reflexivity, courage and relational accountability (Morris-Coker, 2024). Rather than technicians and deliverers, teachers are visible, thinking, feeling subjects who engage ethically without imposing dominance (Nixon et al., 2001). The myth of the 'neutral teacher' assumes that educators can be objective, unbiased agents of knowledge delivery. However, this view neglects the performative nature of teaching, where every act of pedagogy is deeply entangled with politics, culture and personal subjectivities (Butler, 1990; Day, 2013). The neutral teacher is a construct that upholds a myth of neutrality and detachment—both of which mask the ways in which teaching is always an act of interpretation, evaluation and subjectivity. It is an act which asks for trust and expects and demands scrutiny from the children, parents and community in order to safeguard all involved in education.

The notion that children can and should be trusted to lead in their own learning runs counter to deeply ingrained ideas about adult authority and the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship. Traditional pedagogies, steeped in behaviourist and authoritarian traditions, have positioned the teacher as the central authority and the child as a passive receptor of knowledge (Freire, 1972). In this context, children are not expected to be active agents in their own education. However, we encourage the destabilisation of this power dynamic. Drawing on Foucault's concept of dispersed power, we argue that power does not reside solely in the hands of the teacher or the institution, but is constantly in flux, negotiated within the classroom. Trusting children to lead means recognising them as autonomous agents capable of generating questions, exploring ideas and co-constructing knowledge alongside educators. It requires educators to listen, to follow and to create spaces where learners' interests, questions and experiences shape the educational experience. Cushing's (2020) analyses of school language policies reveal how state-endorsed 'behaviour regimes' function as technologies of surveillance and control, as discussed previously, particularly targeting working-class and racialised children. His work demonstrates that so-called 'standard language' policies are not pedagogically neutral but moralised discourses that stigmatise the linguistic repertoires of minority communities. Within such systems, voice is conditioned by respectability politics: children are heard only when they speak in sanctioned forms. This linguistic policing exemplifies epistemic injustice in practice — an institutional refusal to recognise certain ways of speaking and knowing as legitimate contributions to educational life. As Cushing's critique makes clear, a pedagogy of voice demands not only space for children to speak but also the dismantling of the structural filters that determine whose voices are audible, credible and valued.

Classrooms become co-authored spaces where power is shared, voices are heard and responsibility is mutual. For Kimmerer (2013), voice is not solely a human property but a relational act of listening and response. To teach ethically is to make space for many kinds of voices — human and more-than-human — recognising that learning itself is a form of reciprocity. Bakhtin (1981) argues that meaning and understanding are produced dialogically through the interaction of multiple social voices, challenging monologic forms of knowledge and supporting an educational vision in which learning emerges through dialogue, plurality, and relational engagement rather than transmission. As Dunkley (2023) observes, many dominant discourses of sustainability and environmental education continue to reproduce colonial logics of stewardship and control, positioning nature as an object of management rather than a partner in reciprocity. Her call for decolonial sustainability education reframes learning as participation within *ecologies of relation*—a pedagogy that listens to place, history and community rather than imposing abstract environmental ideals. This aligns with the manifesto's commitment to a relational understanding of agency: one that extends beyond human actors to include the more-than-human world in reciprocal networks of care.

Classical notions situate agency as the capacity to act with influence over decisions, often in relation to adult norms (Bergnehr, 2019; Jerome & Starkey, 2022; Duhn, 2014, 2015). As discussed, historical perspectives framed children as 'becoming' adults, limiting their agency and participation (Sundhall, 2017). Childist scholarship (Wall, 2011, 2019) challenges these hierarchies, advocating for a reconstruction of social norms that recognises children as competent actors, capable of meaningful participation and the removal of age-based power orders. Agency is relational, distributed and emergent: every child impacts and is impacted by their surroundings. Legal frameworks, such as the UNCRC (1989), reinforce children's participatory rights. Respecting children's voices is not optional; it is a legal imperative (Lundy, 2007). Current democratic classroom practices—including co-constructed rules, shared decision-making, and circle time—provide some opportunities to enact these rights. Yet critical pedagogy warns against superficial 'pupil voice' initiatives, which can reproduce adult authority and legitimise existing structures rather than effect genuine transformation (Ball, 2003). Children must do more than be heard; they must shape learning, governance and educational futures. Classrooms become sites of relational accountability, where adults and children meet as co-authors of a shared, unfolding story.

We push educators to recognise the inherent power in their positions. As Foucault (1977) alongside many contemporary thinkers and activists remind us, power is not something one holds, but something that flows through every interaction. Teachers do not simply transmit

knowledge—they shape the conditions of knowledge production. Acknowledging the non-neutrality of teaching opens the door for more ethical, inclusive and politically conscious pedagogies. It reclaims their professionalism (Nixon et al., 2001). Rather than denying the teacher's role in knowledge creation, we advocate for educators to embrace their position as co-creators, reflective practitioners who bring their subjectivities into the educational encounter.

2.7 Conclusion – Towards a Manifesto for Plural and Just Education

Chapter 2 has traced the historical, philosophical and political foundations of contemporary education, showing how its core organising concepts—development, knowledge, ability, space and agency—are far from neutral. Each emerged within particular temporal, cultural and ideological regimes, shaping who education serves and what it values. The chapter began by interrogating developmentalism and its linear, age-based logics, revealing how these have naturalised narrow assumptions about progress and normativity. It demonstrated that the temporal structures of schooling—the timetable, the curriculum, the assessment calendar—do not merely organise learning; they discipline it. Children's lives are rendered legible through measurement, and those who do not 'fit' the timelines are too often pathologised or excluded. From this critique of time and development, the argument turned to curriculum and knowledge, examining how epistemic hierarchies determine what counts as legitimate learning. Here, knowledge was shown to function as a technology of power—historically privileging Eurocentric, rationalist and measurable forms of knowing while marginalising the experiential, embodied and relational. The analysis of curriculum thus revealed not only how knowledge is transmitted, but how educational authority is reproduced through claims to objectivity and neutrality.

The following sections deepened this analysis by exploring how these epistemic and temporal regimes intersect with power and ability. Drawing on Foucault and Fricker, the chapter demonstrated that ability is not a natural attribute but a social classification, produced and maintained through assessment and surveillance. Ability operates as both an epistemic and disciplinary construct—defining who is recognised as a knower and who is rendered deficient. In exposing this logic, the chapter argued for a radical reimagining of assessment as relational, formative and narrative rather than punitive or performative. To honour difference rather than deficit is to recognise that diversity—neurological, cultural, social—is not a problem to be solved but the very condition of human learning.

Building upon this, the analysis of space and relationality revealed that power does not reside only in discourse but in the physical and social architectures of schooling. Classrooms, corridors and playgrounds were examined as spatial technologies that organise behaviour and belonging. The logics of enclosure, separation and control were shown to confine bodies, fragment communities and regulate conduct, while alternative pedagogies—from Froebel to Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Forest Schools—illustrate how spatial design can nurture autonomy, curiosity and community. To learn *with* land and *in relation* is to undo the dualisms of mind/body, human/nature and teacher/learner that have long structured modern schooling. Relationality thus emerged as a counter-principle: a way of conceiving education as interdependent, affective and ecological.

The exploration of voice and agency asked who is permitted to speak, act and transform within these educational spaces. It argued that relationality, to be ethical, must be enacted through consequential participation. Children must not only be listened to but trusted to lead; not only consulted but empowered to shape their learning and environments. Rejecting the myth of the neutral teacher, the section positioned teaching as an explicitly ethical and political practice—an encounter of presences rather than a transmission of facts. Agency, reframed through childist and poststructuralist lenses, was presented as distributed, emergent and intersubjective. This conception restores education's democratic and emancipatory potential, demanding structures that make children's speech and decisions materially significant.

Taken together, these arguments reveal education not as a benign process of growth but as a contested terrain of power, culture and ethics. They also illuminate the possibility of transformation. If current systems are historically produced, they can be reimagined. This chapter has therefore not only deconstructed the logics that normalise developmental time, ability hierarchies and spatial control, but also gestured towards alternatives: temporal plurality, epistemic justice, relational pedagogy, ecological learning and participatory agency. What emerges is a vision of education grounded in care, plurality and mutual responsibility—a system that values curiosity over compliance, flourishing over performance, and belonging over measurement.

The task ahead, then, is not reform within the old paradigm but the construction of a new one. Chapter 3 advances this project directly. It articulates the manifesto for educational transformation: a series of proposals and provocations that translate the theoretical

foundations established here into principles for practice and policy. If Chapter 2 exposed the limits of the existing order and looked for inspiration for change, Chapter 3 imagines what might take its place—an education system oriented towards justice, interdependence and the plural futures of all who learn within it.

Chapter 3

The manifesto - propositions for an otherwise school

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Poetic propositions and interruptions

3.3 Call to possibility

3.1 Introduction: a manifesto for rupture, reimagination and reform

Building upon the critique developed in Chapter 2, this chapter turns from analysis to articulation—from exposing the limits of the present system to proposing the contours of another. The theoretical argument leads us to the manifesto chapter. The argument continues the speculative, disruptive and imagined alternative ideas discussed and places them into the dominant discourses of education. The chapter is written in the belief that what we need is not minor reform, but a profound reorientation Education policy is not simply implemented but recontextualised within schools, where it is interpreted and enacted through existing cultures, power relations and material constraints, often reproducing inequality despite reformist intentions (Bowe, Ball and Gold, 1992). This manifesto is written in the belief that rupture must be paired with care, commitment and imagination — the difficult work of proposing alternatives. In this sense, the manifesto is both deconstructive and generative: a refusal of the present and a reaching toward a considered, flexible otherwise. The propositions gathered here are not policy recommendations nor technical solutions. These propositions are poetic-political gestures designed to unsettle what has come to seem natural, necessary or inevitable in education. As Freire insists, 'To speak a true word is to transform the world' (Freire, 1972, p. 87). These propositions are offered in the same spirit — as a form of truth-telling rooted in radical hope. As Foucault wrote, 'We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us' (Foucault, 1977, p. 216). This chapter answers that call.

Scattered throughout are interruptions: fragments, provocations and speculative reflections that challenge linear argument and fixed meaning. In the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), they work as *lines of flight*, undoing coherence in order to make space for multiplicity. These are not ornamental, but integral to the manifesto form. They reflect its politics of disruption and reimagination.

The manifesto does not end with a definitive blueprint, but these are proposals for change. A following chapter imagines how a radically restructured education system might be realised

over ten years linking but not tying the imaginative prolegomenon to inflexible, reality. The propositions here serve as philosophical groundwork for that vision. In that sense, the manifesto belongs to what Bloch called the *concrete utopia* — not an abstract dream, but a materially situated and politically urgent imagining of what education could become. As hooks reminds us, although referring to university education, 'the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy' (hooks, 1994, p. 12). The manifesto reclaims that possibility — not through reform alone, but through a commitment to rupture, relation and reinvention. While this chapter gathers proposals in the mode of a speculative manifesto, the following chapter considers how such ideas might be materially enacted, tracing the possible pathways towards a plural and just education system.

The manifesto

We refuse the tyranny of age.

Who decides when learning begins?

A child is not a number of years lived, a box to be ticked or a level to be met. Age is not a marker of ability, maturity or worth. Categorising learning by age standardises difference, suppresses potential and distorts the deeply individual nature of becoming. We seek learning environments that are multi-aged, multi-voiced, intergenerational, where children and adults learn with and from each other, not in attempted unison but in co-emergence.

We reject curriculum as commandment.

Whose knowledge is this?

The National Curriculum, in its rigidity and scope, speaks not to the learner but to the system. It is a mechanism of control, not care; of reproduction, not imagination. We do not need a universal map—we need the courage to wander. We propose emergent curricula, growing from children's questions, stories and worlds. Education begins not with content, but with context—with the lived experience of the learner.

We challenge the violence of assessment.

Let us refuse to be data.

To test is to isolate, to measure, to compare. Summative assessment fragments the learner, reduces their story to numbers and feeds the machinery of accountability. It installs fear where there should be curiosity. We call instead for formative, narrative, relational assessment—not to judge, but to understand; not to rank, but to reflect. Let us honour process over product, growth over grading.

You watch them watch themselves fail.
A child who draws galaxies is asked to colour in a box.
A child who leads others into joy is told they are below expected standard.

The test cannot see wonder.
We choose not to look through its eyes.

We trust children to lead.

Children are not empty vessels, nor problems to be managed. They are capable theorists, artists, philosophers, community members. We reject adult supremacy masked as pedagogy. We call for pedagogies of listening, of co-construction, of radical respect. To follow a child's interest is not to abandon structure—it is to build it together, from the inside out.

A question is a curriculum.

We declare learning to be relational.

We are made in relation, not in isolation.

Learning is not located in the individual mind, nor in the delivery of content from teacher to pupil. It emerges between people, places, materials and histories. It is an entangled process. Educators are not knowledge-oracles, but co-researchers in the unfolding of meaning. Classrooms are not containers, but encounters—fluid, provisional, alive.

We reclaim play, wonder and the arts as essential.

What if joy were the metric?

In a system obsessed with literacy and numeracy, we restore the importance of play, story, drama, movement and creativity. These are not luxuries; they are languages of knowing. They are how children think, connect, make sense and resist. We honour the aesthetic and affective dimensions of learning.

We dream in many directions.

We resist surveillance in all its forms.

Datafication, inspection, behaviour tracking—these are technologies of distrust. They discipline both children and teachers into compliance. We dream of schools that are spaces of freedom, not oversight—where the educator is free to use imagination and the learner free to explore without fear of failure or observation.

What if the classroom has no walls?

We call for schools to be rooted in community, not competition.

We reject the market logic of school rankings, league tables and performance metrics. Learning should not be a race. Schools should not compete—they should connect. We envision community-embedded education: outdoor classrooms, local projects, intergenerational partnerships and democratic participation. Education as public, collective and common.

The corridor is also a curriculum.

We honour difference, not deficit.

No single story can hold us.

Education systems built on comparison inevitably construct failure. The logic of 'falling behind' assumes a single route, a single pace, a single ideal learner. But no such learner exists. We refuse the deficit narratives that pathologise neurodivergence, disability, trauma or multilingualism. We embrace difference as an opening, not a problem—a site of possibility, not pathology.

We decolonise education.

Knowledge grows in the cracks.

Curricula must stop centring whiteness, Eurocentrism and colonial narratives. Learning must account for histories of displacement, erasure and resistance. We call for plural knowledges, global literacies and storytelling from the margins. Decolonising education is not a bolt-on module—it is a structural unlearning that challenges who decides what counts as knowledge and whose voices are heard.

It tells us:
'Knowledge is neutral.'
'History is agreed.'
'Progress is linear.'

But the margins murmur otherwise. In playgrounds, in stories, in unfinished conversations – the real learning leaks out.

We refuse the myth of the neutral teacher.

What if education begins in not-knowing?

All teaching is political. All education is ideological. The claim to neutrality is a mask for maintaining dominant norms. We call on educators to see themselves not as technicians but as ethical, relational and creative agents. We need teachers who think critically. Teachers who act courageously and teach as an act of love, resistance and social justice.

We demand time.

Slow down. Against the ticking clock, we breathe.

The current system is built on speed: early testing, packed timetables, rushed transitions. But children need time to wonder, to play, to return to ideas again and again. Learning is not a race. We resist the tyranny of targets and propose slowness as a pedagogical stance—one that allows depth, presence and care.

We learn with land, not apart from it.

They are not off-task.
They are inventing new rules.
They are building systems out of laughter. They are learning the laws of gravity by defying them.
Play is not preparation.
It is the thing itself.

Children are too often indoors, detached from the natural world, surrounded by walls and screens. We believe learning happens in place—in woodlands, fields, streets, rivers and gardens. Education must be ecological, not extractive—fostering a sense of kinship with the more-than-human world and cultivating care, awe and responsibility.

We defend the joy of not knowing.

Education must make space for doubt, wonder, confusion and awe. The drive for certainty—right answers, learning objectives, success criteria—kills curiosity. We propose a pedagogy that welcomes uncertainty as a space of potential, where children are not told what to think, but invited to think with.

3.3 Conclusion - Call to possibility

The manifesto does not end. It hopes to expand.

Its propositions are not final words but openings. They are appeals to what education might become when it slips its disciplinary anchors. They are gestures toward an otherwise, spoken from within a system that often demands silence, obedience and closure. They refuse the inevitability of what is and invite the uncertainty of what could be. In the words of Kimmerer (2013), education, like the gift of *Sweetgrass*, must be offered with care, received with gratitude and returned through acts of renewal.

To imagine education otherwise is not to abandon complexity, but to embrace it. It is to step beyond reform as tinkering and toward transformation as re-worlding. In the spirit of post-structural thought, we do not offer a definitive blueprint, we reject standardisation. We offer fragments and provocations. We speak not from a place of mastery but of relation, of becoming-with others.

This is a call to possibility.
A call to pause, to listen, to disrupt.
A call to move with courage and with care.
A call to create learning spaces where joy is not a reward, but a right.
Where the curriculum is not imposed but composed in encounter.
Where assessment becomes reflection, not judgment.
Where time expands.
Where difference blooms.

We write this not as a finished argument but as an unfinished commitment.

Let us build pedagogies that breathe.
Let us dwell in wonder without needing to justify it.
Let us teach as if the world could be remade.

Because it can be.
And it must.

Chapter 4 Educational transformation

4.1 Introduction

4.2 International and UK examples of radical curriculum and systemic reform

4.3 Timeline for systemic educational transformation

4.4 Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

Having articulated a manifesto for educational renewal in Chapter 3, this chapter turns from ethical imagination to the conditions of its realisation. Educational transformation is not a matter of ideological clarity alone, nor can it be secured through rapid policy enactment. Hickman (2014) claims that policy reforms fail as they ignore teacher identity and culture, underestimate complexity and prioritise symbolic change over lived experience. History demonstrates that even the most compelling progressive visions falter when they are introduced without sufficient temporal protection. Without infrastructural support and epistemic coherence (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Fullan, 2007; Alexander, 2012; Biesta, 2010a; Tisdall, 2020) they fail. This chapter therefore advances a deliberately paced, ten-year roadmap for transforming mainstream primary education in England as an ethical strategy. It is designed to safeguard relational, inclusive and plural forms of schooling from premature collapse.

The decision to propose a long-term phased transformation is neither pragmatic caution nor political compromise. It is a direct response to the failures of earlier progressive interventions, most notably the Plowden era (Plowden, 1967), which articulated a powerful child-centred vision but lacked the structural and temporal conditions necessary for its endurance (Alexander, 2000; 2017; Croll, 2005). Plowden's principles proved vulnerable precisely because they were not institutionally embedded were weakly aligned with emerging assessment and accountability regimes and were rapidly displaced by political shifts that favoured standardisation and central control (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Chitty, 1988; Alexander, 2012; 2018). This manifesto therefore proceeds differently. It treats time not as a neutral backdrop to reform but as a pedagogical and political resource: something to be deliberately designed protected and inhabited collectively (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Biesta, 2010c).

What follows is therefore not a programme of sudden change but a deliberately staged process of cultural structural and epistemic re-orientation. The ten-year horizon acknowledges that trust professional capacity and public legitimacy cannot be manufactured through policy decree but must be cultivated over time (Fullan, 2007; Sahlberg, 2011). The interdependent phases proposed in this chapter are designed to interrupt the familiar cycle in which progressive education is briefly celebrated, unevenly implemented and swiftly dismantled under shifting political priorities (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Alexander, 2012). Transformation is instead conceived as cumulative relational and resilient — capable of enduring changes in policy climate precisely

because it has been woven into the everyday fabric of educational life and professional practice (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015; Biesta, 2010c).

4.2 International and UK examples of radical curriculum and systemic reform

The manifesto's proposal for a ten-year transformation does not begin from abstract optimism alone. In line with the argument formed throughout the thesis, it begins from history. Evidence that education systems *can* be reoriented towards relational, holistic and inclusive purposes exists. Evidence that progressive reform is repeatedly derailed when it is scaled without coherence, capacity and protection also exists. The point of looking outward—to international frameworks and marginal UK practices—is therefore not to assemble a catalogue of 'best practice', but to identify the conditions under which systemic change becomes durable and equitable rather than uneven and vulnerable.

As argued in Section 2.3, one of the clearest lessons from the history of curriculum reform is that some of the most transformative shifts have not emerged from the logic of 'raising standards', but from early childhood and community-rooted reimaginings of what education is for. New Zealand's *Te Whāriki*, first introduced in 1993 and revised in 2017, is frequently cited not because it offers a perfected model, but because it explicitly frames curriculum as relational, socio-ecological and culturally situated. It positions Māori values and community participation as foundational rather than supplementary (Carr & May 1993; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). Its structure resists linear prescription. The structure is woven rather than sequenced and is oriented towards dispositions of belonging and wellbeing as conditions of learning. Likewise, the Reggio Emilia approach — developed in post-war Italy as a project of democratic reconstruction — rejects the child as a passive recipient of knowledge and instead positions learning as co-constructed with educators families and environments (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006). These are not merely curricular innovations. They are political statements about the child as citizen, the school as civic space and education as an ethics of relation.

A second lesson is that national-level reform succeeds only when it is supported by alignment across policy layers. Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), initiated in 2004 and rolled out from 2010, represents a significant move away from content saturation towards broader capacities and purposes (Scottish Government, 2004). Wales's *Successful Futures* review (2015)

and the ensuing curriculum implemented from 2022 similarly foregrounds wellbeing (Singh et al., 2025), cross-disciplinary learning and the cultivation of ethical, capable citizens (Welsh Government, 2015; Power, Taylor & Newton, 2020). These reforms matter because they show that it is possible—at least in principle—to name education as more than attainment production. Yet they also demonstrate the fragility of progressive aspiration when implementation conditions are uneven. In Scotland, the very flexibility that enabled local interpretation also produced variability, with ambiguity around assessment and uneven professional support contributing to fragmented enactment (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012). In Wales, regional disparities in resourcing and readiness have similarly shaped how reform has been experienced across schools and communities (Williams & Smith, 2020; Singh et al., 2025). The recurring pattern is clear: when accountability and assessment remain misaligned with curricular intentions, educators are left attempting to enact emancipatory aims within systems that still reward measurable compliance.

Finland is often treated as the emblem of 'successful progressivism', but it is most useful here not as an exportable template but as a reminder that systemic change is ecological and slow. Finland's internationally recognised approach is sustained by professional trust. There is a long-standing de-emphasis on standardised testing and a deep investment in teacher education and equity-driven resourcing (Sahlberg, 2011). It illustrates that autonomy is not simply the removal of control. Autonomy is a different kind of infrastructure—one in which teachers are prepared, trusted and supported to exercise judgment. Assessment is not required to function as a surveillance apparatus due to a culture of trust. Recent curriculum updates in Finland, including the 2016 framework, extend this orientation by strengthening interdisciplinarity, flexibility and future-facing competencies (Nikkola, Niemi & Toom, 2024). In this sense, Finland underlines a central argument of the manifesto: progressive transformation cannot be legislated into existence by rhetorical rebranding. It requires a sustained reallocation of trust, time and material conditions.

Denmark's Folkeskole reforms offer an allied insight, particularly in their insistence that wellbeing and social-emotional dimensions are not decorative additions to schooling but part of its core architecture (Jensen, 2019). Read alongside Scotland, Wales and Finland, Denmark reinforces the proposition that inclusion is not an 'intervention' applied after difficulty appears. Inclusion is a prior condition produced through cultures of care, relational competence and systemic readiness. This resonates strongly with the manifesto's refusal to treat flourishing as something that happens once children have 'met expectations'. Instead, it positions

flourishing, understood in relation to virtue not just happiness or success (Carr, 2021) as the very ground on which meaningful learning is built.

However, the international picture also supplies caution. Across reform contexts, a persistent danger is that progressive language is adopted while the deeper machinery of schooling remains intact (Ball, 2003; Cuban, 2013; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012). Alvunger et al. (2021) conclude that across Europe, curriculum coherence and educational quality depend less on the design of national frameworks than on the agency within curriculum-making processes, with reforms repeatedly undermined where accountability and assessment constrain teachers' professional judgement. Hardy (2023) argues that under performative policy conditions teachers' work and professional learning are increasingly standardised and compliance-orientated, positioning professional judgement as a problem to be managed. Where high-stakes assessment regimes, inspection pressures and public performance metrics continue to dominate, systems routinely translate expansive curricular aims back into narrow proxies of attainment, and teachers learn — rationally rather than cynically — to prioritise what is measured and rewarded (Au, 2007; Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Biesta, 2015b). In this way, progressive reform becomes reduced to surface innovation. It is unevenly distributed and easily reversible. This is the policy–practice gap not as implementation failure, but as structural contradiction (Ozga, 2023; Braun & Maguire, 2020). It explains why reforms can appear bold at the level of documentation while remaining largely unchanged in classroom life (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It also helps to account for the historical vulnerability of progressive 'take-overs' to political reversal. Where reform is not institutionally embedded across assessment, resourcing and professional formation, it remains exposed to retraction under shifting policy climates (Alexander, 2010; 2017; Levin, 2013).

These lessons matter acutely in England, where recent reform history has been characterised by rapid, centralised adjustment rather than long-term ecological change. The legacy of the Plowden era remains instructive. Although *Children and their Primary Schools* (Plowden, 1967) articulated a powerful child-centred and experiential vision grounded in progressive philosophical traditions (Davis, 2018), subsequent analyses have shown that it was never structurally secured against a return to standardisation (Alexander & Flutter, 2009; Galton, 2018). Writing fifty years after Plowden, Alexander (2018) argues that Plowden's failure was not pedagogical but systemic: its principles were rhetorically endorsed yet institutionally unsupported, leaving them vulnerable to political reversal. When educational priorities shifted in the late 1970s and beyond, the system lacked aligned assessment frameworks, protected

professional autonomy and a coherent policy ecology capable of sustaining progressive practice (Alexander, 2018; Ball, 2018; Whitty, 2018). This history is therefore not merely a warning but a diagnosis. It suggests that the central problem has never been the credibility of progressive educational principles themselves, but the vulnerability produced by systemic incoherence — between what is said to matter and what is measured. What teachers are invited to enact and what they are structurally penalised for doing matters (Biesta, 2017; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015).

For this reason, the manifesto's ten-year, phased approach is not a stylistic choice; it is a theory of change. The Foundation phase corresponds to what international reforms repeatedly show as essential. Transformation begins with conditions—professional learning, public legitimacy, protected experimentation and the slow (re)building of trust. The Expansion phase answers the second lesson. Without assessment and accountability redesign, progressive curricula are either marginalised or instrumentalised. The final Transformation phase addresses the third lesson. Reforms endure only when they become structurally secure and cease to feel exceptional—embedded in law, funding, teacher education and public expectation. In other words, the manifesto's sequencing is designed precisely to avoid the Plowden pattern: an inspiring vision introduced into an unchanged system and then blamed for its own impossibility.

Taken together, these international and UK examples do not offer a single route forward; they reveal constraints and enabling conditions. They show that holistic and relational curricula are possible (Carr & May, 1993; Ministry of Education, 2017; Rinaldi, 2006) National systems have publicly named education as broader than measurable attainment (Scottish Government, 2004; Welsh Government, 2015). There are trust-based models dependent on long-term investment and professional formation rather than policy rhetoric alone (Sahlberg, 2011; OECD, 2018). These examples also show that progressive reform becomes stressed when it is implemented without coherence, equity and protection (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012; Williams & Smith, 2020). The manifesto's roadmap is therefore not an attempt to 'borrow' other systems. It is an attempt to learn from their successes and failures—so that transformation in England is built not as a moment, but as a durable, publicly defended re-founding of what primary education is.

4.3 Timeline for systemic educational transformation

The transformation proposed in this manifesto is deliberately long, phased and interdependent. The ten-year horizon functions not as a policy cycle but as a structural condition of change. Educational systems are not amenable to rapid recalibration. They are complex social ecologies in which practices, assessment regimes and public expectations co-evolve (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Fullan, 2016). Attempts at rapid reform—however visionary—have repeatedly faltered because they underestimate this complexity and privilege policy declaration over professional capacity and systemic coherence (Ball, 2012; Biesta, 2017; Alexander, 2007; 2017; 2018). This section therefore turns from justification to architecture. We outline a sequenced model of transformation designed to cultivate trust, build capacity and secure alignment across curriculum, assessment and governance.

This manifesto therefore rejects the logic of immediate replacement or wholesale rupture. Instead, it advances transformation as a process of cultural reorientation, requiring time for trust to be rebuilt, for professional knowledge to deepen, for new forms of accountability to be legitimised and for communities to recognise education as a shared public good rather than a competitive sorting mechanism. Ten years allows for generational change within the profession, for children to experience the system across developmental phases, and for reform to move from experimentation to normativity.

Crucially, the phases that follow are not sequential steps that can be accelerated or bypassed. They are interdependent conditions of possibility. Each phase prepares the ground for the next, while remaining porous and responsive to revision. This design directly addresses the central weakness of earlier progressive reforms: the misalignment between curriculum, assessment, professional learning and public accountability. What follows is therefore a theory of systemic change enacted over time.

Years 1–3: Foundation – creating the conditions for trust and legitimacy

The first phase is deliberately slow. Its purpose is not to ‘deliver outcomes’ but to shift the conditions under which outcomes are imagined and evaluated. The first phase focuses on narrative, legitimacy and professional infrastructure. Without this phase, reform risks being dismissed as ideological.

At a national level, this phase requires a reframing of education as a form of public wellbeing infrastructure rather than a narrow preparation for labour markets or league-table success. Public discourse matters here. Reform cannot survive if it is experienced as something done *to* schools rather than *with* them. The early emphasis, therefore, is on coalition-building across educators, families, local authorities, unions, researchers and community organisations. This is how reform acquires social durability rather than remaining politically fragile.

Within schools, this phase prioritises protected experimentation. A limited number of innovation zones and pilot clusters—deliberately diverse in geography, demography and governance—are granted regulatory flexibility to explore curriculum co-construction, mixed-age learning, outdoor pedagogy, relational assessment and alternative timetabling. These sites function not as exemplars to be copied wholesale, but as learning laboratories. Their purpose is to generate evidence, disclose tensions and make visible both possibilities and limits.

Teacher education is foundational here. Progressive reform fails when it assumes that teachers can simply 'adopt' new pedagogies without sustained intellectual and emotional support (Tisdall, 2020). This phase therefore embeds relational, trauma-informed and inquiry-based pedagogies into initial teacher education and establishes professional learning communities that value reflection, dissent and experimentation. Teacher exchanges with alternative schools, special schools and community-based settings are epistemic interventions which broaden what counts as legitimate educational knowledge.

The Foundation phase also begins to loosen curricular rigidity. Rather than abolishing curriculum outright, it creates space within existing frameworks for project-based learning, ecological inquiry, student-led investigation and creative practice. The aim is not coherence at this stage, but permission—permission to teach differently without fear of penalty.

Years 4–7: Expansion – aligning structures with values

The second phase addresses the central failure point of most progressive reforms: misalignment. It is at this stage that reform either deepens or collapses. Expansion is not about replication at scale; it is about structural coherence.

Practices developed during the Foundation phase are extended across a much broader range of schools, supported by formal networks rather than informal enthusiasm. Mixed-age learning, personalised pacing and community-based projects move from the margins into the mainstream—not as optional enrichment, but as legitimate pedagogical pathways. Importantly, this expansion is accompanied by a decisive reorientation of assessment and accountability. Without this shift, innovation becomes performative and teachers revert to compliance under pressure (for example, Hargreaves, Quick & Buchanan, 2023). Hence during this phase, high-stakes summative testing in the primary years is systematically reduced and replaced with portfolio-based, narrative and dialogic forms of assessment. These are not framed as 'soft alternatives' but as more epistemically honest accounts of learning over time. Inspection frameworks are redefined to include wellbeing, belonging, inclusion and exclusion rates, relational climate and student voice. What is inspected signals what is valued; this phase ensures that values and metrics are no longer in contradiction. Schools increasingly function as community hubs rather than sealed institutions. Learning extends beyond classrooms into local environments, intergenerational projects and civic spaces. This is not framed as vocational diversion but as democratic participation. Interdisciplinary learning becomes structurally possible because time, space and assessment have been redesigned to support it.

This phase also marks a decisive break with the false binary between 'academic' and 'practical' learning. Arts, sustainability, food systems, digital media and care work are embedded across the curriculum. These are not alternatives for some children but as entitlements for all. This directly counters the stratifying tendencies that undermined earlier reforms.

Years 8–10: Transformation – institutionalising plurality and equity

The final phase is concerned with endurance and sustainability. Transformation succeeds only when new practices become ordinary—legally, financially and culturally protected from reversal. This phase institutionalises what earlier phases made possible.

Inclusive, relationship-based pedagogy becomes standard practice rather than specialist intervention. Multi-disciplinary teams—educators, therapists, family liaison workers and youth practitioners—are embedded within schools, not as crisis responses but as preventative infrastructure. Exclusion is addressed structurally through flexibility, mentorship and restorative practice rather than managed after harm has occurred. Curriculum plurality is fully

realised. Schools offer multiple, equally valued pathways without hierarchy. Children are supported to shape their learning trajectories with real agency, guided by mentorship rather than compliance. Crucially, this plurality is protected by legislation that enshrines holistic development, ecological literacy and democratic participation as core educational purposes. Assessment at this stage no longer functions as a sorting mechanism. Success is measured through indicators of flourishing: belonging, purpose, relational competence, contribution and wellbeing. These indicators are not abstract ideals but publicly accountable measures that reflect what society claims to value.

Overall, this phased approach directly addresses the conditions that caused earlier progressive reforms to falter. It does not assume immediate consensus. Professional readiness or public trust are not assumed. They are built. It does not introduce new pedagogies into old accountability regimes. It changes the regimes themselves. It does not romanticise innovation. It protects it. Most importantly, it recognises that education is not transformed by vision alone, but by time, alignment and care. This is why the manifesto insists on slowness where past reforms demanded speed. Interdependence is valued where others pursued fragmentation. Institutional protection is essentially planned for where earlier movements relied on goodwill. Transformation is not a takeover. It is a re-grounding.

4.4 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has argued that educational transformation succeeds not through speed or ideological certainty, but through temporal care, systemic coherence and ethical restraint. The ten-year, phased model proposed responds directly to the failures of earlier progressive reforms by embedding change within structures that can sustain it. It treats education not as a policy lever, but as a relational ecology — one that must be cultivated if it is to endure.

Crucially, the transformation proposed in this chapter is not only ethically compelling but economically and structurally viable. Evidence syntheses, including the Education Endowment Foundation, consistently show that several approaches foregrounded in this manifesto, such as outdoor learning, metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies, small-group teaching and social and emotional learning are typically low to moderate in cost. They claim that each produces meaningful gains in attainment, engagement and wellbeing, with particularly strong effects for disadvantaged learners (EEF, 2023, 2025; Durlak et al., 2011; Nickow et al., 2020; Donker et

al., 2014; Rickinson et al., 2004; Natural England, 2016). What this suggests is not a need for wholesale expansion of educational spending, but for a decisive reorientation of how resources are allocated. Instead of late-stage remediation, exclusionary practices and high-stakes assessment infrastructure costs but towards relational, preventative and inclusive forms of educational provision.

International comparisons further strengthen this case. OECD data indicate that education systems characterised by professional trust, reduced reliance on standardised testing and strong investment in teacher education—such as Finland, Estonia and Norway—spend proportionately more on early intervention, inclusion and staff development, and less on external accountability mechanisms (OECD, 2022; Sahlberg, 2011). These systems demonstrate that investing in relationships, autonomy and wellbeing is not antithetical to academic success, but foundational to it. In this light, the manifesto's ten-year horizon is not an arbitrary timescale, but a necessary one. It allows for cultural change, workforce development and infrastructural adaptation to occur without the destabilising effects of rapid, top-down reform.

The economic argument for phased transformation is further reinforced by UK-based evidence on the costs of inaction. The Early Intervention Foundation estimates that delayed support for children and families costs the public sector at least £17 billion annually, while research by the IPPR and Social Mobility Commission highlights the profound long-term costs of exclusion, disengagement and unmet need across health, employment and criminal justice systems (EIF, 2018; IPPR, 2022a, 2022b; Bajwa-Patel et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, the manifesto's emphasis on early, relational and inclusive education represents not an idealistic departure from fiscal responsibility, but a strategy of collective care and economic prudence. Prevention, here, is both a moral and material imperative.

Importantly, this approach also addresses the historical fragility and weaknesses of progressive educational reform in England. Unlike earlier moments where child-centred ideals were introduced without sufficient alignment, the model proposed here insists on coherence across systems. Its interdependent phases ensure that pedagogical innovation is not left vulnerable to policy reversal, that teachers are supported rather than exposed, and that change is embedded culturally as well as structurally. By moving slowly enough to build trust, but decisively enough to shift norms, the transformation becomes resilient rather than episodic and tokenistic. Benveniste and McEwan (2000) reinforce the argument that pedagogical innovation fails

systemically, not intrinsically and strengthens the case for locally responsive, flexible curriculum design.

Seen in this way, the manifesto does not call for additional burdens on an already strained system, but for a redistribution of attention, trust and resources towards what demonstrably enables children and communities to thrive. The question, therefore, is not whether England can afford such a transformation, but whether it can afford to continue with a system whose costs—human, social and economic—are so well documented. The ten-year, phased approach articulated here offers a credible route beyond cyclical reform and towards an education system capable of enduring change: one that is publicly funded, relationally grounded and oriented towards justice, care and collective flourishing. In setting these goals, the manifesto does not promise a perfected system. It offers instead a framework for collective becoming - slow enough to be humane, robust enough to resist reversal and open enough to remain responsive. In doing so, it reclaims educational reform as a democratic, ethical and hopeful practice.

Chapter 5
Conclusion: welcoming critique and sustaining possibility

This concluding chapter draws together the conceptual, ethical and practical threads of the thesis and turns them outward. It does not seek consensus or resolution from its readers. Instead, it welcomes critique as participation. It is a necessary condition for keeping educational thought alive, accountable and responsive. Across the preceding chapters, this study has traced how development, curriculum, power, knowledge, space and relationality are *entangled* in contemporary schooling. The argument, culminating in a manifesto articulates speculative yet grounded propositions for educational transformation. The purpose of this chapter is not to restate those arguments, but to reflect on how they might be read and contested—and why such contestation is not a threat to educational justice, but one of its conditions.

The thesis began from the assertion that education in England is in crisis. This crisis was framed not solely in terms of outcomes, attainment or international comparison, but as a crisis of purpose, relation and imagination. The central research question asked whether mainstream primary education might be reimagined otherwise, and if so, how. The response offered here was neither a policy prescription nor a technical reform programme, but a manifesto for change and a potential roadmap for transformation. The manifesto does not claim authority through completeness or certainty. Its function is to interrupt what has come to feel inevitable in education and to reopen the question of what schooling is for and what education is. In this sense, the conclusion is not an ending, but a return to invitation. It asks us to think with others how education might become more relational, inclusive, open and responsive to unpredictability.

5.1 From diagnostic critique to manifesto and roadmap

The inquiry opened with a speculative vignette of a reimagined primary school. It showed an amalgam of play, care, artistry, documentation, mixed-age inquiry and formative assessment. This was not offered as an ideal model to be replicated, but as a provocation. It asks why such practices remain marginal rather than routine. Situated within contemporary disquiet - post-pandemic reflection, decolonial critique and challenges from all areas of educational research, the theoretical chapters traced how developmental time, epistemic enclosure, classificatory

power, spatial control and constrained agency shape mainstream schooling. Against these logics, the thesis advanced alternative principles: temporal multiplicity, epistemic plurality, relational assessment, porous architectures and shared authorship. From this analysis emerged the manifesto's poetic–political commitments. Chapter 4 translated those commitments into a phased, strategy for systemic transformation informed by international reform trajectories. The original contribution of this thesis lies in this movement: from critique to proposition, from diagnosis to design. Like others, it argues for educational rigour that is ethical rather than performative, relational rather than competitive, and world-attuned rather than extractive. However, it offers more than just critique. It shows what could change. It offers evidence from alternative settings to help others reimagine the system. It reframes education not as a neutral delivery system, but as a contested and consequential site of becoming.

5.2 Welcoming critique as method

A manifesto that seeks to reimagine educational structures, epistemologies and ethics cannot expect universal agreement—and should not seek it. Indeed, disagreement is integral to its method. The depth of disaffection within English education, evidenced by teacher attrition, declining wellbeing and sustained concern about pupil health (DfE, 2024; NASUWT, 2024), suggests that something fundamental is misaligned. As stated, the manifesto enters this space not as a solution, but as an opening for renewed debate and deliberation leading to rethinking, reviewing reimagining, which is now essential. The critiques addressed here from traditionalist, technocratic, developmental, empiricist, materialist and pragmatic scholars, are not treated as external objections to be rebutted, but as generative tensions. Following Levitas (2013), utopia is firmly understood as method: a way of holding the real and the possible in productive relation. Critique, in this same framing, becomes co-construction rather than refutation.

Traditional and essentialist thinkers may challenge the manifesto's critique of the National Curriculum and its call to deconstruct dominant conceptions of 'powerful knowledge' (Hirsch, 1987; Young, 2008; Young & Muller, 2013). These concerns are taken seriously. However, the thesis insists that knowledge is never neutral. Knowledge is historically situated, culturally selective and often Eurocentric (White, 2018; Wrigley, 2019). The manifesto does not reject knowledge or intellectual rigour. It calls for epistemic broadening—a decolonial reconfiguration of intellectual life that questions whose knowledge is legitimised and to what ends (Mignolo,

2010; de Sousa Santos 2014, 2018). Rigour, in this framing, resides not in uniformity but in depth, plurality and critical engagement.

From a technocratic perspective, the manifesto's proposals may appear fiscally unrealistic or destabilising to accountability systems grounded in measurement and summative benchmarking. Yet such critiques expose the extent to which audit and data have come to function as proxies for educational quality (Ball, 2013; Biesta, 2010c; Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). The manifesto does not deny the need for public accountability, but it challenges the assumption that quality can be adequately captured through standardised metrics alone. Following Alexander (2010), it argues for an expanded conception of evidence—one that includes belonging, relational wellbeing and creative engagement as legitimate indicators of educational success.

Developmental psychologists, empiricist researchers and materialist scholars may raise further objections. They may warn against the abandonment of cognitive science, testable outcomes or structural analysis. The manifesto refuses these false binaries, described as unstable by Morss (1992). It does not reject developmental insight, empirical research or material critique. Yet it resists their use as mechanisms of normalisation and exclusion (Burman, 2008; Walkerdine, 1990). Learning is understood as relational and emergent, shaped by biological, social, cultural and material forces. Structural inequality, particularly within racialised capitalism (Hudis, 2018), is recognised as inseparable from epistemic and symbolic violence (Arday, 2021). Transformation, therefore, must be both material and relational.

Educators and leaders working within inspection regimes, funding constraints and safeguarding responsibilities may regard the manifesto as idealistic. History offers cautionary examples such as the progressive experiments Risinghill and Dartington Hall, which faltered without institutional protection (Levy, 1971; Selleck, 1997). The manifesto learns from these failures by insisting that transformation must occur within the mainstream system, supported by legislation, professional trust and relational accountability. Leadership, within this vision, is reimagined not as managerial control but as collective stewardship. It should be distributed, dialogic and accountable to community.

5.3 Hope, caution and ethical responsibility

This thesis proceeds with hope, but not innocence. History reminds us that utopian language can be co-opted toward coercive ends (Kumar, 2021). Popper's (1945) warning against closed utopias, Tallis's (2011, 2014) defence of human complexity and Lederach's (2005) notion of moral imagination collectively frame a stance of critical hope. The hope is visionary yet reflexive, aspirational yet accountable. This ethical stance is sharpened by ecological and decolonial critiques. Dunkley (2018) cautions against sustainability discourses that reproduce hierarchies, while Kimmerer (2013) reframes knowledge indigenously as gift and responsibility. Together, they extend the manifesto's relational ethics beyond the social to the ecological. Learning, in this framing, becomes an act of reciprocity. Hogan (2010) describes imagination as the *heartwork* of learning. Learning is an ethical, imaginative and relational process. As we have argued with the help of diverse literature and evidence, rather than mastery or control, learning involves openness, vulnerability and receptivity, which unfolds slowly, resists acceleration and requires time for reflection.

5.4 Conclusion

This project has argued that what appears natural or inevitable in education is in fact historical, contingent and therefore open to reimagining. Through its analysis, the thesis has shown how schooling structures shape who belongs, who succeeds and whose voices matter. This needs to change. Those who have been excluded thus far, those who have failed thus far, and those whose voices have not been heard need an education system change. The manifesto and roadmap offered here do not claim final answers. They offer conditions for thinking otherwise. The original contribution of this work lies in its synthesis: a critical genealogy of educational governance, a relational vocabulary for ethical pedagogy and a defence of the manifesto as a legitimate scholarly method. Together, these elements argue that educational renewal requires not incremental reform but epistemic and ontological reorientation. This work shows we need a rethinking of what it means to know, to teach and to learn in relation.

The thesis ends, quite deliberately, without closure. What follows this work—debate, resistance, adaptation and collective experimentation—will determine its value. The invitation stands - to slow down, to listen, to trust children and one another, and to continue the unfinished work of reimagining education otherwise. The school described in the opening

prolegomenon was never a fantasy but a threshold. It is an invitation to think differently about what education is and could be. Such classrooms already exist, scattered and vulnerable, waiting to be recognised as futures in the making. The task ahead is not simply to conjecture, but to realise, defend and extend them—to ensure that mainstream education, in all its plurality and uncertainty, remains a shared act of reimagination, care and courage.

References

Adams, I. (1990) Kant, Pestalozzi and the role of ideology in educational thought, *Journal of philosophy of education*, 24 (2).

Ahmed, S. (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, Duke University Press.

Ailwood, J. (2008) Mothers, teachers, maternalism and early childhood education and care: Some historical connections, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8 (2), 157-165.

Aldridge, J. (2020) Education at the crossroads: An existential crisis, *Educational Review,* 72 (1), 123-138.

Alexander, R. (2000) *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Alexander, R. (2007) Where there is no vision… *Forum*, 49 (1 and 2).

Alexander, R. (Ed.) (2010) *Children, their world, their education: Final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London, Routledge.

Alexander, R. (2011) Evidence, rhetoric and collateral damage: the problematic pursuit of 'world class' standards', *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 41 (3), 265-286.

Alexander, R. (2012) Neither national nor a curriculum? *Forum*, 369-384.

Alexander, R. (2015) Teaching and learning for all? The quality imperative revisited, *International journal of educational development,* 40, 250-258.

Alexander, R. (2017) Primary education: evidence with vision, Academy of Social Sciences (ed), Making the Case for the Social Sciences*: Education*. London, AcSS, 18-19.

Alexander, R. (2018). *Plowden: primary education's unfinished business. In reflections on Children and their Primary Schools at 50 years.* London/Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Alexander, R., Entwisle, H., and Olson, L. (2020) *Making Sense of Education*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Alexander, R. & Flutter, J. (2009) *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 1: Past and Present*. Cambridge, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Alijabreen, H. (2020) Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia: a comparative analysis of alternative models of early childhood education, *International journal of early childhood*, 52, 337-353.

Allen and Cowdery (2006) *The Exceptional Child: Inclusion in Early Childhood Education* (5th ed.), Belmont, Thomson Wadsworth.

Allen, M., and Goddard, A. (2017) Pedagogy as insurgent critique: Education for social justice in a neoliberal world. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 9 (1), 1-21.

Almond, N. (2020) Curriculum coherence: how best to do it? in C. Sealy and T. Bennett (Eds.), *The researchED guide to the curriculum,* Woodbridge, John Catt Education Ltd., 59-71.

Alternatives in education available at https://alternativesineducation.org (last accessed 18.01.26).

Alvunger, D., Soini, T., Philippou, S. and Priestley, M. (2021) Conclusions: Patterns and trends in curriculum making in Europe, in M. Priestley, D. Alvunger, S. Philippou. and T. Soini (Eds.) *Curriculum making in Europe: policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*, Bingley, Emerald.

Andersson, C. and Palm, T. (2018) Reasons for teachers' successful development of a formative assessment practice through professional development – a motivation perspective, *Assessment in education: principles, policy and practice*, 25 (6), 576-597.

Andreotti, V. (2011) *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Andreotti, V. (2014) Education, knowledge and the righting of wrongs, *Other Education*, 3 (1), 19–31.

Andreotti, V. (2021) *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*, USA, North Atlantic Books.

Andreotti, V. de Oliveira., & De Souza, L. M. T. M. (2012) Introduction: (Towards) global citizenship education “otherwise”, In V. de Oliveira Andreotti and L. M. T. M. De Souza (Eds.), *Postcolonial perspectives on global citizenship education* (pp. 1–6), Routledge.

Andrews, K. (2016) The problem of political blackness: lessons from the Black Supplementary School Movement, *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 39 (11), 2060-2078.

Andrews, K. (2020). The Radical “Possibilities” of Black Studies, *The Black Scholar*, 50 (3), 17-26.

Angliss, B. (2021) Single, separate and surprising souls: the past, present and future role of research in SEND in K. Wespieser and T. Bennett *ResearchED Guide to Special Educational Needs: and evidence informed guide for teachers*, London, John Catt educational ltd.

Anwyll, S. and Clements, J. (2016) *A Guide to Assessment Tools and support for primary schools in England*, Oxford University Press.

Apple, M. W. (2004) *Ideology and Curriculum* (3rd ed.), London, Routledge.

Apple, M. W. (2013) *Can Education Change Society?* Routledge.

Ardoin, N. M., and Bowers, A. W. (2020). Early childhood environmental education: A systematic review of the research literature, *Educational research review*, 31, 100353.

Arendt, H. (1954) The crisis in education, *Partisan Review,* 25 (4), 493–513.

Aries, P. (1962) *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, London, Jonathan Cape

Armstrong, D., and Armstrong, G (2021) *Educational Trends Exposed: How to be a Critical Consumer* (1st ed.), London, Routledge.

Arnott, L. (2023) Play, adventure and creativity: unearthing the excitement and fun of learning, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31 (2), 305–308.

Arthur, J., Goodman, D. M. and Clemente, M. (2025) Towards an Anthropological Perspective on Human Flourishing in Education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 73 (2), 201-214.

Au, W. (2007) High-Stakes Testing and Curricular Control: A Qualitative Metasynthesis, *Educational Researcher*, 36, 258-267.

Azano, A. P., and Stewart, T. T. (2015) Exploring place and practicing justice: Preparing preservice teachers for success in rural schools, *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 30 (9), 1–12.

Azorín, C., and Ainscow, M. (2020) Guiding schools on their journey towards inclusion, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24 (1), 58-76.

Azpitarte, F. and Holt, L. (2024) Failing children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England: New evidence of poor outcomes and a postcode lottery at the Local Authority level at Key Stage 1, *British Educational Research Journal*, 50, 414–437.

Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press.

Ball, S. (1990) *Education Reform: A Critical and Post-Structural Approach,* Buckingham, Open University Press.

Ball, S. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy,* 18 (2), 215–228.

Ball, S. (2008) *The education debate*, London, Policy press.

Ball, S. (2012) *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neoliberal Imaginary,* London, Routledge.

Ball, S. (2013) *The education debate* (2nd Ed), London, Policy press.

Ball, S. (2018) The tragedy of state education in England: reluctance, compromise, and muddle – a system in disarray, *Journal of the British Academy,* 6, 207–238.

Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2010). Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come, *Derrida Today,* 3 (2).

Barad, K. (2017) Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-membering, and facing the incalculable, *New Formations*, 92 (92), 56-86.

Barad, K. and Gandorfer, D. (2021). Political Desirings: Yearnings for Mattering Differently. *Theory and Event,* 24 (1) 14-66.

Barblett, L, Knaus, M, Barratt-Pugh, C. (2016) The pushes and pulls of pedagogy in the early years: Competing knowledges and the erosion of play-based learning, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 41 (4), 36–43.

Barnard, P.A. (2018) *Socially collaborative schools: the heretic's guide to mixed-age tutor groups, systems design, and the goal of goodness*, London, Rowman and Littlefield.

Barnes, H.A. (1997) *Life for the Spirit: Rudolf Steiner in the Crosscurrents of Our Time,* London, Steiner Books.

Barnsley, R. H., Thompson, A. H., and Barnsley, P. E. (1985) Hockey success and birthdate: The relative age effect, *Canadian Association for Health, Physical Activity and Recreation,* 51, 23-28.

Barone, D. F., Maddux, J. E., & Snyder, C. R. (2012) *Social cognitive psychology: History and current domains,* Springer Science & Business Media.

Basargekar, A., and Lillard, A.S. (2023) Motivation and Self-Determination in Montessori Education, in A. K. Murray, E. T. Ahlquist, M. McKenna and M. Debs (Eds.), *Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education,* 261-270.

Beatty, B. (2017). Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey and the problem of play. In T. S. Popkewitz (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Education.* New York, Oxford University Press.

Beauvais, C. (2016) Ages and ages: the multiplication of children's 'ages' in early twentieth-century child psychology, *History of education,* 45 (3), 304-318.

Becher, T. and Maclure, S. (2024) *The politics of curriculum change,* London, Routledge.

Beech, J. (2023) Policy transfer in education. *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, 13, 151-158.

Bell, J.F. and Daniels, S. (1990) Are Summer-born Children Disadvantaged? The Birthdate Effect in Education, *Oxford review of education*, 16 (1), 67-8.

Benn, M. (2018) English schools are broken. Only radical action will fix them The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/09/schools-broken-radical-action-education (accessed 29.01.26).

Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Bennett, R.E. (2011) Formative assessment: a critical review, *Assessment in education: principles, policy and practice,* 18 (1), 5-25.

Benveniste, L.A.& McEwan, P.J. (2000) Constraints to Implementing Educational Innovations: The Case of Multigrade Schools, *International Review of Education,* 46, 31–48.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research,* 15 (2), 219-234.

Berliner, D. (2011) Rational responses to high stakes testing: the case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41 (3), 287-302

Bernstein, B (1977) *Class, Codes and Control, Volume 3: Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Bernstein, B. (2001) *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique, (Revised edition),* Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield.

Berry, C. (2018) *Mixed age classes in urban primary schools: perceptions of headteachers,* Institute of Education, University of London, 1-13.

Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) Early years education: an international perspective, *International review of curriculum and assessment frameworks internet archive (INCA),* London, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Biesta, G. (2006) *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future,* London, Routledge.

Biesta, G. (2007) Why "what works" won't work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research, *Educational Theory*, 57 (1), 1-22.

Biesta, G. (2010a) Why 'What Works' Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29 (5), 491-503.

Biesta, G. (2010b) Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education, *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability,* 22 (1), 33–46.

Biesta, G. (2010c) *Good education in an age of measurement,* London, Routledge.

Biesta, G. (2013) *The beautiful risk of education,* London, Routledge.

Biesta, G. (2015a) What is Education For? On Good Education, Teacher Judgement, and Educational Professionalism, *European Journal of Education*, 50 (1), 75-87.

Biesta, G. (2015b) What Works? In Education and the Politics of Evaluation, In K. S. Taber (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Philosophy for Children*, London, Routledge, 503–514.

Biesta, G. (2017) Don't be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: on the role of the teacher in emancipatory education, *Policy futures in education*, 15 (1), 52-73.

Biesta, G. (2020) The reimagining of education in times of crisis, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52 (3), 238-254.

Biesta, G. (2024) Taking education seriously: The ongoing challenge, *Educational Theory*, 74 (3), 434–448.

Bingham, C. (2008) *Authority is relational: rethinking educational empowerment,* USA, State University of New York press.

Black A, Bessudnov A, Liu Y and Norwich B (2019) Academisation of Schools in England and placements of pupils with Special Educational Needs: an analysis of trends, 2011–2017, *Frontiers in education,* 4 (3).

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5 (1), 7–74.

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (2001). *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*, London, King's College London School of Education.

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2018) Classroom assessment and pedagogy, *Assessment in education: principles, policy and practice*, 25 (6), 551-575.

Blatchford, P., Russell, A. & Bassett, P. (2005) The effects of school breaktime on pupils' behaviour and academic performance, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75 (3), 373–395.

Blatchford, P. & Baines, E. (2006) *A follow-up national survey of breaktimes in primary and secondary schools in England,* London, Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Bloom, A. (1978) Rousseau on the education of the citizen, *Daedalus*, 107 (3), 25–51.

Boix, R. and Domingo-Peñafiel, L. (2005) Rural School in Spain: Between Compensatory Education and Inclusive Education, *Sisyphus Journal of Education* 3 (2), 48-57.

Borsay, A. (2012) Disabled children and special education 1944-1981, *a presentation delivered at the Department for Education, 26.*

Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J.-C. (1977) *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (R. Nice, Trans.), London, SAGE Publications (Original work published 1970).

Bourke, B. (2014) Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *The Qualitative Report,* 19 (33), 1–9.

Bourke, R. (2016) Liberating the learner through self-assessment, *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 46 (1), 97-111.

Bowe, R., Ball, S.J., and Gold, A. (1992) *Reforming Education and Changing Schools: Case studies in policy sociology (1st ed.),* London, Routledge.

Boyd, P. (2020) Mixed-age teaching and mastery approaches to mathematics, *Teacher Education Advancement Network journal*, 12, 4-15.

Boyle, B. and Bragg, J. (2006) A curriculum without foundation. *British Educational Research Journal,* 32, 569-582.

Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G. (2016) *The Datafication of Early Years Education and its Impact on Pedagogy*, London, UCL IOE Press.

Bradbury, A. (2018) The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability: A 'necessary evil' amid the policy storm, *British Education Research Journal,* 44, 539-556.

Bradbury, A. (2019) Rethinking 'fixed ability thinking' and grouping practices: questions, disruptions and barriers to change in primary and early years education, *FORUM*, 61 (1), 41-52.

Braidotti, R. (2019) A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 36 (6), 31–61.

Brando, N. (2016) Distributing Educational Opportunities: Positionality, Equality and Responsibility, *The International Journal of Children's Rights,* 24 (3), 575-598.

Braun, A. and Maguire, M. (2020) Doing without believing – enacting policy in the English primary school, *Critical Studies in Education*, 61 (4), 433-447.

Bremner, N. (2021) The multiple meanings of 'student-centred' or 'learner-centred' education, and the case for a more flexible approach to defining it, *Comparative Education,* 57 (2) 159-186.

Bremner, N., Sakata, N. and Cameron, L. (2022) The outcomes of learner-centred pedagogy: A systematic review, *International Journal of Educational Development,* 94, 102649.

Bremner, N., Sakata, N. and Cameron, L. (2023) Teacher education as an enabler or constraint of learner-centred pedagogy implementation in low-to middle-income countries, *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 126, 104033.

Bridges, D. (2002) Personal autonomy and practical competence, in D. Bridges (Ed.), *Education, Autonomy and Democratic Citizenship: philosophy in a changing world*, London, Routledge.

Broadfoot, P. and Black, P. (2004) Redefining assessment? The first ten years of assessment in education, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice,* 11 (1), 7-26.

Brouillette, L., Attfield, K. and Telfer-Radzat, K. (2025) Editorial: One hundred years and counting: the international growth of Waldorf education, *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1568282.

Bruce, S. (2000) *Education and Enlightenment: The Development of Educational Thought,* London, Routledge.

Bruce, T. (2012) *Early Childhood Education* (4th ed.) London, Hodder Education.

Burbridge, M. (2021) *The National Curriculum – what needs to change?* Available at https://www.diverseeducators.co.uk/the-national-curriculum-what-needs-to-change (last accessed 19.01.26).

Burkhardt, A. H. and Schoenfeld, A. H. (2023) Assessment and mathematical literacy: a brief introduction, *International Encyclopaedia of Education,* 13, 220-233.

Burman, E. (2008) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (2nd edition), London, Routledge.

Burman, E. (2015) Limits of deconstruction, deconstructing limits, *Feminism and psychology*, 25 (3), 408-422.

Cannella, G.S. (1997) *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution, New* York, Peter Lang.

Carr, D. (2021) Where's the Educational Virtue in Flourishing? *Educational Theory*, 71 (3), 389-407.

Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories, London,* 1-224.

Carr, M., and May, H. (1993) *Te Whāriki: Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education,* Wellington, New Zealand Ministry of Education.

Caruso, M. (2023) The coming of 'age': Educational and bureaucratic dimensions of the classification of children in elementary schools (Western Europe, 19th century), *European Educational Research Journal,* 22 (3), 394-412.

Castro-Kemp, S. and Mahmud, A. (2021) School Closures and Returning to School: Views of Parents of Children With Disabilities in England During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Education,* 6, 666574.

Chambers, S., Smillie, S. and Watson, N. (2024). Rethinking children's right to leisure during school holidays. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 27 (3), 399-416.

Charkin, Emily; (2020) *'Building a community together': past and present meanings of manual work at Kilquhanity School (1940-1996) and Wennington School (1940-1975).* Doctoral thesis (Ph. D), UCL (University College London).

Chen, O., Kalyuga, S. and Sweller, J. (2016). When Instructional Guidance is Needed, *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 33 (2), 149-162.

Chung, S. and Walsh, D.J. (2000), Unpacking child-centredness: a history of meanings, *Curriculum studies,* 32 (2), 215-234.

Clark, R. E., Kirschner, P. A. & Sweller, J. (2012) Putting students on the path to learning: The case for fully guided instruction, *American Educator,* 36 (1), 6–11.

Clarke, E. and Thompson, S. (2024) Systemic vulnerability as a lens to explore young people's experiences of transition from alternative provision settings to post-16 mainstream education, *Educational Review,* 77 (7), 2202-2222.

Clarke, K. G. A. M. (2003) High-stakes assessment in England and Singapore, *Theory into practice*, 42, 66-74.

Claxton, G. (2021) *The Future of Teaching: And the Myths That Hold It Back*, London, Routledge.

Cocoron, S., Kelly, C., Bond, C. and Knox, L. (2024) Emotionally based school non-attendance: development of a local authority, multi-agency approach to supporting regular attendance, *British Journal of Special Education*, 51, 98-110.

Collins, J. (2009) Social reproduction in classrooms and schools, *The annual review of anthropology*, 38, 33-48.

Collins, J. (2013) Public sociology and education: Engaging the community in educational reform, *Journal of Educational Theory,* 45 (2), 195-210.

Collins, P. H. (2015) Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas, Annual Review of Sociology, 41 (1), 1-20.

Collins, P. H., da Silva, E. C. G., Ergun, E., Furseth, I., Bond, K. D. and Martínez-Palacios, J. (2021) Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20 (3), 690.

Compayré, G. (1907) *History of Pedagogy*, Boston, D.C. Heath.

Cook-Sather, A. (2006) Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36 (4), 359–390.

Cossentino J.M. (2005) Ritualizing expertise: a non-Montessorian view of the Montessori method, *American journal of education*, 111, 211-244.

Cossentino, J. M. (2006) Big work: Goodness, vocation, and engagement in the Montessori Method, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36 (1), 63-92.

Costa, C. and Murphy, M. (2025) Critical education, generative artificial intelligence and the tyranny of freedom: a critique of modern 'technocracy', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 1-17.

Crain, W. C. (2005) *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications* (5th ed.), New Jersey, Pearson.

Crawford, C., Dearden, L. and Greaves, E. (2013) The impact of age within academic year on adult outcomes, *Institute for fiscal studies working paper w13/07*, available at https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/wp201307.pdf (last accessed 20.01.26).

Cremin, L. A. (1959) John Dewey and the Progressive-Education Movement, 1915-1952. *The School Review*, 67, 160-173.

Cronin, Z. (2019) To mix or not to mix: a critical review of literature on mixed-age groups in primary school, *Cambridge open-review educational research e-journal*, 6, 165-179.

Crowley, S. J., Wolfson, A. R., Tarokh, L. and Carskadon, M. A. (2018) An update on adolescent sleep: New evidence informing the perfect storm model, *Journal of Adolescence*, 67, 55-65.

Dabaja, Z. F. (2021) Reviewing two decades of research on the Forest School impact on children: The sequel, *Education 3-13*, 50 (6), 737–750.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., and Pence, A. (2013) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation (2nd ed.),* London, Routledge.

Dalli, C., White, E. J., Rockel, J., Duhn, I., Buchanan, E., Davidson, S., Ganly, S., Kus, L., & Wang, B. (2012) Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 47 (2), 70–86.

Damrosch, L. (2005) *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin.

Dandelion Forest school nursery, available at https://www.dandelioneducationltd.com (last accessed 20.01.26)

Daniels, H., Thompson, I. and Tawell, A. (2019) After Warnock: The Effects of Perverse Incentives in Policies in England for Students With Special Educational Needs, *Frontiers in Education* 4 (36), 1-12.

Daniels, S., Shorrocks-Taylor, D. and Redfern, E. (2000) Can Starting Summer-born Children Earlier at Infant School Improve their National Curriculum Results? *Oxford review of education*, 26 (2), 207-22.

Darling, J. (1993) Rousseau as progressive instrumentalist, *Journal of philosophy of education*, 27 (1), 27-38.

Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., and Osher, D. (2019) Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, *Applied Developmental Science*, 24 (2), 97–140.

Darnton, R. (1984) *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History,* New York, Basic Books.

Davies, L. (2009) Comparative education in an increasingly globalised world, In R. Cowen & A. M. Kazamias (Eds.), *International Handbook of Comparative Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 117–132). Dordrecht, Springer.

Davis, R. A. (2003) Education, Utopia and the Limits of Enlightenment, *Policy Futures in Education*, 1 (3), 565-585.

Davis, R. A. (2010) Government Intervention in Child Rearing: Governing Infancy, *Educational Theory*, 60, 285-298.

Davis, R. A. (2018) Education, literature and the paradox of 'the whole child in *ResearchEd* available at https://researched.org.uk/2018/09/26/education-literature-and-the-paradox-of-the-whole-child/ (last accessed 20.01.26).

Davis, R. A. (2020) Mother at the source: Romanticism and infant education. In Veliki, M.D. and Duffy, C. (eds.) *Romanticism and the Cultures of Infancy,* Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 91-113.

Davis, R. A. and O'Hagan., F. (2010) *Robert Owen,* London, Continuum.

Day, C. (2013) *The New Lives of Teachers,* London, Routledge

De Fraja, G. and Landeras, P. (2006) Could do better: The effectiveness of incentives and competition in schools, *Journal of Public Economics*, 90 (1-2), 189-21.

de Groot, I., and Lo, J. (2021) The democratic school experiences framework: A tool for the design and self-assessment of democratic experiences in formal education, *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice,* 16 (3), 211-226.

Dean, J. (2010) Feminism in the Papers, *Feminist Media Studies*, 10, 391-407.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1987) A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (B. Massumi, Trans.), USA, University of Minnesota Press.

DeLuca, C. and Hughes, S. (2014) Assessment in early primary education: An empirical study of five school contexts, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education,* 28 (4), 441-460.

Demangeon, A., Claudel-Valentin, S., Aubry, A., and Tazouti, Y. (2023) A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Montessori Education on Five Fields of Development and Learning in Preschool and School-Age Children, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 73, 102-182.

Denervaud, S., Knebel, J.-F., Immordino-Yang, M.H. and Hagmann, P. (2020) Effects of Traditional Versus Montessori Schooling on 4- to 15-Year-Old children's Performance Monitoring, *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 14, 167-175.

Dent, N. (1988) The basic principle of Emile's education, in *Journal of philosophy of education,* 22 (2), 139-149.

Department for Education (DfE) (2013a) *The national curriculum in England: Key stages 1 and 2 framework documents,* London, DfE, accessible at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81a9abe5274a2e8ab55319/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf (last accessed 29.01.26).

Department for Education (DfE) (2013b) *Primary assessment and accountability under the new national curriculum, London,* London, DfE, accessible at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cc142ed915d63cc65ca90/Primary_assessment_and_accountability_under_the_new_curriculum_consultation_document.pdf (last accessed 28.01.26).

Department for Education (DfE) (2014b) *Reforming assessment and accountability for primary schools: Government response to consultation on primary school assessment and accountability*, London, DfE.

Department for Education (DfE) (2014a) The National Curriculum in England: Framework document, London, DfE , accessible at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4 (last accessed 28.01.26).

Department for Education and Department of Health (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. London, DfE.

Department for Education (DfE) (2016) *Key stage 1: phonics screening check,* DfE, London.

Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: setting standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five,* DfE, London, available at https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf (last accessed 28.01.26).

Department for Education (DfE) (2019) *Special educational needs in England: January 2019* available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2019 (last accessed 28.01.26).

Department for Education (2021) *Initial teacher training (ITT) market review report,* DfE, London.

Department for Education (DfE) (2022) *Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan*, London, DfE.

Department for Education (DfE) (2023) *School funding statistics and national budget data*, London, DfE.

Department for Education (2023) *Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement* available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ef773513ae1500116e30db/Suspension_and_permanent_exclusion_guidance_september_23.pdf (last accessed 28.01.26).

Department for Education (DfE) (2024) *Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 2 summary report*, DfE, London, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-2-summary-report (last accessed 29.01.26).

Department for Education and employment (DfEE) (1999) *The National Curriculum*, DfEE, London.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2006) *Learning outside the classroom manifesto*, DfES, London.

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1988) *Education Reform Act* 1988, HMSO.

Derry, J. (2013) *Vygotsky: philosophy and education,* West Sussex, Wiley Blackwell.

Dewey, J. (1897) My Pedagogic Creed, *The School Journal*, 54, 77–80.

Dewey, J. (1902) *The Child and the Curriculum*, USA, University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1997a) *Experience and education*, London, Touchstone.

Dewey, J. (1997b) *How we think,* London, Dover Publications.

Dewey, J. (2004) *Democracy and education,* London, Dover Publications, (Original work published in 1916).

Dijk, E.F., van Oers, B., and Terwel, J. (2004) Schematising in early mathematics education. Why, when and how? *European Early Childhood Educations Research Journal*, 12 (3), 71 – 83.

Díaz, A., Nussbaum, M., Ñopo, H., Maldonado-Carreño, C., and Corredor, J. (2015) Orchestration: Providing Teachers with Scaffolding to Address Curriculum Standards and Students' Pace of Learning, *Educational Technology and Society*, 18 (3), 226– 239.

Veliki, M. D. and Duffy, C. (2020) Introduction: The Romantic Cultures of Infancy, in Veliki, M.D. and Duffy, C. (eds.) *Romanticism and the Cultures of Infancy,* Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 91-113.

Donaldson, M. (1978) *Children's Minds,* London, Fontana.

Duncan, D. (2009) The primary curriculum reviews: An alternative vision? *Education 3-13,* 37 (2), 89 – 93.

Dunkley, R. (2018) *Learning on the land: Relational geographies of environmental education*. London, Routledge.

Dunkley, R. A. & Smith, T. A. (2022) Conversations with practitioners 1: Dr. Sunita Welch. In Smith, T. A., Pitt, H. & Dunkley, R. A. (Eds.), *Unfamiliar Landscapes: Young People and Diverse Outdoor Experiences,* Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 213–231.

Durr, K. (2005) The school: a democratic learning community, *Council of Europe*, available at https://www.living-democracy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/School_democraticlearning_community_EN.pdf (last accessed 20.01.26).

Dweck, C. S. (2002) The development of ability conceptions, in A. Wigfield and J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Development of achievement motivation*, USA, Academic Press, 57–88.

Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) (2018) *Realising the Potential of Early Intervention: A Strategic Approach and Evidence-Based Priorities for Action*, London, Early Intervention Foundation.

Eastman, G., Kearney, C., and Dyer, J. (2011) Curriculum narrowing and the impact of high-stakes accountability *Educational Policy,* 25 (3), 501–533.

Eastman, A., Smellie, D., Clark, J, McGrath, G., Collins, J., d'Abbro, J. and Smith, W. (2011) No excuses: a review of educational exclusion, *A Policy report by the Centre for Social Justice*, Centre of Social Justice, London.

Edinburgh Steiner School (2026) https://www.edinburghsteinerschool.org.uk/steiner-education/pastoral-care/, (last accessed 20.01.26)

Education Committee (2017) High-stakes testing harming teaching and learning in primary schools, *UK Parliament,* available at from https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2015/primary-assessment-report-published-16-17/ (last accessed 28.08.25).

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2023) Teaching and Learning Toolkit, London, EEF.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), (2025) Teaching and Learning Toolkit. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/social-and-emotional-learning? (accessed 27.12.25), London, EEF.

Education Scotland (2019) 'The purpose of education' available at https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/about-curriculum-for-excellence/the-purpose-of-the-curriculum/ (last accessed 28.08.24)

Edwards, C. (2002) Three Approaches from Europe: Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia, *Early childhood research and practice*, 4(1), 1-14.

Edwards, C. (2012) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation,* Praeger, London.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., and Forman, G. (Eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*, USA, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Egan, K. (1984) Development in Education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 18, 187-193.

Egan, K. (2002) *Getting it wrong from the beginning: our progressivist inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget,* London, Yale University press.

Eggan, T. and Stobart, G. (2014) *High stakes testing in education,* London, Routledge.

Eglitis, E., Miatke, A., Virgara, R., Machell, A., Olds, T., Richardson, M., Maher, C., (2024a) Children's Health, Wellbeing and Academic Outcomes over the Summer Holidays: A Scoping Review, *Children*, 11 (3) 287.

Eglitis, E., Simpson, C., Singh, B., Olds, T., Machell, A., Virgara, R., Richardson, M., Brannelly, K., Grant, A., Gray, J., Wilkinson, T., Rix, Z. and Maher, C. (2024b) Effect of Summer Holiday Programs on Children's Mental Health and Well-Being: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *Children*, 11 (8), 887.

Eglitis, E., Singh, B., Olds, T., Virgara, R., Machell, A., Richardson, M., Brannelly, K., Grant, A., Gray, J., Wilkinson, T., Rix, Z., Tomkinson, G. R., Maher, C. (2024c) Health effects of children's summer holiday programs: a systematic review and meta-analysis, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity,* 21 (1), 119.

Elkind, D. (2007) *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*, Balance.

Emirbayer, M., and Mische, A. (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (4), 962–1023.

Engelmann, S. (2022) Alternative(s): Better or just different? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 56, 523–534.

Engels, F. (1970) *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* (Translated by Aveline, E., 1892), Progress Publishers (first published 1880). Online version, 1993, 1999, 2003, available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Engels_Socialism_Utopian_and_Scientific.pdf (last accessed 30.01.26).

Erstad, O. S., Siddiq, F. (2023) Educational assessment of 21st century skills and novel initiatives, yet a lack of systemic transformation, in *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed.), 13, 245–255.

Facer, K. (2021) *Futures in Education: Towards an Ethical Practice*. Paris, UNESCO.

Fahs, B. (2019a) Writing with Blood, *The Radical Teacher,* 113, 33-38.

Fahs, B. (2019b) The New Feminist Manifesto: What Does Feminism Stand for Today? *Feminist Studies,* 45 (2), 293–314.

Fahs, B. (2019c) Manifestos for a radical pedagogy: The roots and relevance of manifesto writing in education, *Radical Pedagogy Journal,* 3 (4), 56-72.

Fielding, M. (2004) New wave "student voice" and the renewal of civic society, *London Review of Education*, 2 (3), 197–217.

Fielding, M., and Moss, P. (2011) *Radical education and the common school: A democratic alternative,* London, Routledge.

Fisher, D., and Frey, N. (2022) Tending to learning environments *ASCD*, 80 (4), available at https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/tending-to-learning-evironments (last accessed 30.01.26).

Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, Zero Books.

Fisher, T. (2008) The era of centralisation: the 1988 Education Reform Act and its consequences, *Forum*, 50 (2), 255-264.

Ford, A. (2022) Why is 'powerful knowledge' failing to forge a path to the future of history education? *History Education Research Journal*, 19 (1), 3.

Forlin, C., Chambers, D. and Banks, J. (2023a) Developing a scale to measure the diversity of motivations and practices of home-schooling, *Educational Review*, 77, 750-763.

Forster, E. M. (1992) *Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi*, London, Continuum.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish* (Translated by A. Sheridan), London, Penguin

Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (Translated by D. Macey), London, Penguin Books.

Fredriksson, P. and Ockert, B. (2014) Life-cycle effects of age at school start, *The economic journal*, 124 (579), 977-1004.

Freire P (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* London, Penguin.

Froebel, F. (2005) *The education of man* (Translated by W. N. Hailmann), London, Continuum.

Fullan, M. (2007) *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.) London, Routledge.

Fullan, M. (2016) *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.) London, Routledge.

Fullan, M. and Langworthy, M. (2014) *A rich seam: how new pedagogies find deep learning,* Pearson, London.

Furlong, J. (2023) Universities, Research, and Initial Teacher Education in England and Wales: Taking the Long View, in I. Menter (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Teacher Education Research,* Springer Nature, Switzerland.

Galton, M. (1995) *Crisis in the Primary Classroom* (1st ed.) London, Routledge

Galton, M. (2021) Primary education in England: Performing to survive, *Education 3–13*, 49 (4), 399–412.

Gamlem, S. M. & Vattøy, K.-D. (2023) Feedback and classroom practice, In McGaw, B., Baker, E. & Peterson, P. (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed.), 13, 89–95.

Gay, G. (2018) *Culturally responsive teaching: theory, research and practice,* New York, Teachers college press.

Gerrard, J., Albright, J., Clarke, D. J., Clarke, D. M., Farrell, L., Freebody, P., and Sullivan, P. (2013) Researching the creation of a national curriculum from systems to classrooms, *Australian Journal of Education*, 57 (1), pp. 60-73.

Gershon, W. S., and Helfenbein, R. J. (2023) Curriculum matters: educational tools for troubled times, *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 55 (3), 251–269.

Gilbert, J. (2017) Back to the future? Aims and ends for future-orientated science policy – the New Zealand context, *Knowledge cultures,* 5 (6), 74-94.

Gillard (2018) Education in the UK, History Docs, available at https://education-uk.org/history/ (last accessed 24.01.26).

Gillborn, D. (2008) *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy*? London, Routledge.

Gillborn, S. and Delahunty, T. (2025) The psychological complex in contemporary education policy, *Journal of Education Policy,* Advance online publication.

Giroux, H. (2011) *On Critical Pedagogy*, London, Continuum.

Giroux, H. A. (2004) *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Giroux, H. A. and Giroux, S. S. (2006) Challenging Neoliberalism's New World Order: The Promise of Critical Pedagogy, *Critical Methodologies*, 6 (1), 21-32.

Giroux, H. A. (2010) Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy, *Policy Futures in Education*, 8 (6), 715-721.

Giroux, H. A. (2018) When Schools Become Dead Zones of the Imagination: A critical pedagogy manifesto, *The Wiley Handbook of Global Educational Reform,* 503-515.

Givord, P. (2020) *How age at entry at school affects future educational and socio-emotional outcomes: evidence from PISA*, Working Papers 2020-27, Center for Research in Economics and Statistics.

Goldmark, D. (2021) Music, Memory, Pixar, *American Music*, 39, 226-236.

Gonzalez, N., Moll, L.C., and Amanti, C. (2005) *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (1st ed.). Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum.

Goodall, C. (2019) 'There is more flexibility to meet my needs': Educational experiences of autistic young people in Mainstream and Alternative Education Provision, *Support for Learning*, 34 (1), 4-33.

Gray, P. (2013) *Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life,* London, Hachette.

Gray, A., Woods, K. and Nuttall, C. (2022) Person-centred planning in education: an exploration of staff perceptions of using a person-centred framework in an alternative provision, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 27 (2), 118-132.

Greene, M. (1995) *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change,* Jossey-Bass.

Greene, M. (2007) *Imagination and the Healing Arts* New York, Teachers College Press.

Hall, S. (1990) Cultural identity and diaspora, in J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference,* London, Lawrence and Wishart.

Hallam, S., Ireson, J., Lister, V., Chaudhury, I. A. and Davies, J. (2003) Ability grouping practices in the primary school: a survey, *Educational studies,* 29 (1), 69-83.

Halle-Erby, K. (2024) "Relationships are reality": centering relationality to investigate land, indigeneity, blackness, and futurity, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 37 (1), 114-131.

Hamilton, D. (1989) *Towards a theory of schooling*, Falmer, London.

Hamilton, D. and Zufiaurre, B. (2014) *Blackboards and bootstraps: revisioning Education and Schooling*, Sense publishing, Rotterdam.

Handscombe, J. (2016) 'A teacher's role is to take the restrictions of the curriculum and build within it such inspiration and fascination that students are carried with us', TES magazine, available here https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/teachers-role-take-restrictions-curriculum-and-build-within-it-such-inspiration-and (last accessed 27.01.26)

Hanna, J. and Ashby, S. (2022) Reflections on manifesto writing, *Multimodality and Society*, 2 (1), 23-30.

Hanson, R. (2022) 'A times tables test too far' in *More than a score,* available at https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/a-times-tables-test-too-far/ (last accessed 24.01.26).

Haraway, D. (2004) *The Haraway Reader*, New York, Routledge.

Haraway, D. J. (2016) *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene.* Duke University Press.

Hardman, M. (2019) Ghosts in the Curriculum - reframing concepts as multiplicities, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 53, 273-292.

Hardy, I. (2023) Standardized learning: the "problem" of teachers' work and learning under performative policy conditions, *International Encyclopaedia of Education,* 13, 20-28.

Hargreaves, A. & Goodson, I. (2006) Educational change over time? The sustainability and non-sustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42 (1), 3–41.

Hargreaves, E., Quick, L. and Buchanan, D. (2023) National Curriculum and Assessment in England and the continuing narrowed experiences of lower-attainers in primary schools, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55 (5), 545–561.

Hargreaves, L. (2017) Primary Education in Small Rural Schools: Past, Present and Future, in Maclean, R. (ed) *Life in Schools and Classrooms: Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, concerns and prospects,* 38, Singapore, Springer.

Harris C (2016) '*Our curriculum is so narrow that it bores both pupils and teachers – And crushes creativity*' available at https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/our-curriculum-so-narrow-it-bores-both-pupils-and-teachers-and-crushes-creativity (last accessed 27.01.26).

Harris, P. (2012) *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Hayes, C. (2024) *Oral evidence given to the UK Parliament Education Committee*, London, UK Parliament

Hayes, D. (2021) Positionality in research: A way forward, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53 (3), 233-248.

Haynes, J. and Murris, K. (2017) Intra-generational education: Imagining a post-age pedagogy, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49 (10), 971-983.

Haynes. J. and Suissa, J. (2022) Creating and sustaining democratic spaces in education, *The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, 56, 939-942.

He, M., Schultz, B. and Schubert, W. (2015) *The guide to curriculum in education,* SAGE.

Heafford, M. R. (2016) *Pestalozzi: His Thought and Its Relevance Today*, London, Routledge.

Heissel, J. A., Adam, E. K., Doleac, J. L., Figlio, D. N., and Meer, J. (2019) Testing, stress, and performance: how students respond physiologically to high-stakes testing, *Education Finance and Policy,* 16 (3), 1-50.

Herbert, C. (2004) *Pestalozzi: The Educator*, London, Routledge.

Heubert, J.P. (2000) *High-stakes testing opportunities and risks for students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities,* New York, National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum.

Hickey, A. and Riddle, S. (2023) The practice of relationality in classrooms: beyond relational pedagogy as empty signifier, *Teachers and Teaching*, 29 (7-8), 821-832.

Hickman, R. (2014) Rethinking Educational Change: Beyond Rhetoric and Policy, *Journal of Education Policy*, 29 (1), 1–21.

Hogan, P. (2010) *The new significance of learning: imagination's heartwork,* Abingdon, Routledge.

Holland, D., Lachiocotte, W., Skinner, D. and Cain, C. (1998) *Identity and agency in cultural worlds,* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Holland, P. (1992) *Education and the Politics of Difference,* London, Routledge.

Holt, J. (1976) *Instead of education: Ways to help people do things better,* Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* Routledge.

Hoskins, K. and Wainwright, E. (2023) 'I am not a teacher!' The challenges of enacting home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic among low-income families of primary-aged children, *Education 3-13*, 53, 600-614.

Hudis, P. (2018) Racism and the Logic of Capital: A Fanonian Reconsideration, *Historical Materialism,* 26 (2), 199-220.

Hudis, P. (2023) Beyond the Binary of Race and Class: A Marxist Humanist Perspective, *Historical Materialism*, 31 (2), 49-77.

Hunter, T., and Walsh, G. (2014) From policy to practice? The reality of play in primary school classes in Northern Ireland, *International Journal of Early Years Education,* 22 (1), 19–36.

Hyman, P. (2020) 'Our school systems are broken. Let's grab this chance to remake them', *The Guardian*, Sunday 5 July, available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/05/our-school-systems-are-broken-lets-grab-this-chance-to-remake-them (last accessed 28.01.26).

Immordino-Yang, M., Nasir, N., Cantor, P. and Yoshikawa, H. (2024) 'Weaving a Colorful Cloth: Centering Education on Humans' Emergent Developmental Potentials, *Review of Research in Education*, 47, 1-45.

Inayatullah, S. (2005) *Questioning the future: methods and tools for organisational and societal transformation*, Taipei, Tamkang University press.

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2022a) *Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Disadvantage*, IPPR.

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2022b) *Fixing the Foundations: Rethinking Inclusive Education,* IPPR.

James, A., and Prout, A. (Eds.) (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood,* London, Falmer Press.

Jensen, B. (2019) *Education in Denmark: An Overview,* OECD Publishing

Jezard, A. (2017) 'France is experimenting with a radically different approach to education' *World Governments Summit,* available at https://www.worldgovernmentssummit.org/observer/articles/detail/france-is-experimenting-with-a-radically-different-approach-to-education (last accessed 29.01.26).

Johnston, C., Malcolm, A. and Pennacchia, J. (2024) How is theory used to understand and inform practice in the alternative provision sector in England: trends, gaps and implications for practice, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 29, 2273-2290.

Jones, C. (2002) *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon*, London, Penguin.

Jones, K. (2016) *Education in Britain 1944 to the present*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Joshi Hansen, U. (2018) Why does age determine the how, what and with whom of learning?, *Education reimagined,* https://education-reimagined.org/the-why-series/ (last accessed 24.01.26).

Keet, A. (2015) Epistemic injustice and the decolonisation of knowledge in education, *Education as Change*, 19 (2), 1–21.

Kennedy, D. (2016) *The Oracular Child: Early Childhood Education and the Cult of the Child,* Palgrave Macmillan.

Kirby, P. (2019) Marshmallow claps and frozen children: sitting on the carpet in the modern 'on-task' primary classroom, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 1-17.

Kirschner, P.A., Sweller, J. and Clark, R.E. (2006) Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching, *Educational Psychologist*, 41 (2), 75-86.

Knight, S. (2013) *Forest School and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years*, Sage Publications, London

Kohn, A. (2011) *Feel-bad education,* Boston, Beacon Press.

Kristjánsson, K. and Vanderweele, T. J. (2025) The proper scope of education for flourishing, *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* 59 (3-4), 634-650.

Kumar, A. (2021) *Education, utopia and the state: Modern and contemporary perspectives,* London, Bloomsbury.

Kumashiro, K.K. (2002) *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy*, New York, Routledge.

Kylie (2020) 'How we Montessori' available at https://www.howwemontessori.com/how-we-montessori/2020/02/freedom-within-limits-what-it-looks-like-in-our-home-with-three-children.html (last accessed 28.08.24).

Labour Party (2024) Change: Labour Party manifesto 2024, available at https://labour.org.uk/change/ (last accessed 24.01.26)

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995) Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy *American Educational Research Journal*, 32 (3), 465–491.

Lather, P. (2007) *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science.* Albany, SUNY Press.

Laval, C. (2018) Bourdieu and Foucault: To each his own neoliberalism? *Social Anthropology*, 26 (1), 63–75.

Lee, S. (2024) The OECD's new discourse of curriculum reform: student agency, competency, colonization, and translation, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2024, 58, 321–342.

Lenz Taguchi, H. (2010) *Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-Active Pedagogy*. London, Routledge.

Lesko, N. (2012) *Act your age*, London, Routledge.

Levitas, R. (2013) *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Levitas, R. (2017) Utopia as method: Thinking differently about possible futures. *Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity* (CUSP), available at: https://www.cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/05-Ruth-Levitas-Essay-online.pdf cusp.ac.uk (last accessed 25.01.26).

Lewis, T. E. and Friedrich, D. (2016) Educational states of suspension, *Educational philosophy and theory*, 48 (3), 237-250.

Lillard, A. S. (2005) *Montessori: The science behind the genius*. 1st edition, London, Oxford University Press.

Lillard, A. S. (2023) Why the time is ripe for an education revolution, *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*, 1, 1177576.

Lillard, A. S., Jiang, R. H. and Tong, X. (2025) Perfect timing: sensitive periods for Montessori education and long-term wellbeing, *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*, 3, 1546451.

Lillejord, S. (2023) A more intelligent accountability - future directions, *International Encyclopaedia of Education,* 13, 155-162.

Lindner, K.-T., Schwab, S., Emara, M. and Avramidis, E. (2023) Do teachers favor the inclusion of all students? A systematic review of primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 38 (6), 766-787.

Linebaugh, P. (2014) *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*, Michigan, PM Press.

Lingard, B., Martino, W., and Rezai-Rashti, G. (2013) Testing regimes, accountabilities and education policy: commensurate global and national developments, *Journal of Education Policy*, 28 (5), 539–556.

Little, A.W. (2001) Multigrade teaching: towards an international research and policy agenda, *International journal of educational development*, 21, 481-497.

Losberg, J. and Zwozdiak-Myers, P. (2024) Inclusive pedagogy through the lens of primary teachers and teaching assistants in England, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28 (4), 402-422.

Louis, K. S. (2010) Democratic Schools, Democratic Communities: Reflections in an International Context, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 2, 93-108.

Louv, R. (2005a) Nature deficit: is ADHD research overlooking the green factor? *Health and the environment,* ORION, 70-71.

Louv, R. (2005b) *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder,* Algonquin Books.

Lupinacci, J., Happel-Parkins, A. and Turner, R. (2023) *Ecocritical Perspectives in teacher education*, Brill, London.

Maas, J., Schoch, S., Scholz, U. (2021) Teachers' perceived time pressure, emotional exhaustion and the role of social support from the school principal, *Social Psychological Education* 24, 441–464.

Mackenzie, C., and Stoljar, N. (Eds.) (2000) *Relational autonomy: Feminist perspectives on autonomy, agency, and the social self*, London, Oxford University Press.

MacNaughton, G. (2005) *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: Applying Poststructural Ideas.* London, Routledge.

Macy, M., Harshbarger, D., Burke, K. and Neukirch, E. (2025) Experiential learning in Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reflections from in-service and pre-service professionals, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education,* 1-23.

Malaguzzi, L. (1994) 'Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins' in C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman (Eds.), *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (2nd ed.), Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Manyukhina, Y. (2022) Children's agency in the National Curriculum for England: a critical discourse analysis, *Education* 3-13, 50 (4), 506–520.

Marshall, C. (2017) Montessori education: a review of the evidence base, *npg Science of learning* 2 (11), 1-9.

Martin-Denham, S. (2021). Alternatives to school exclusion: interviews with headteachers in England, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 26 (4), 375-393.

Marx, K., and Engels, F. (1969) *The Communist Manifesto* (S. Moore, Trans.) Penguin Classics.

Mary, A.A. (2014) Re-evaluating the concept of adulthood and the framework of transition, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17 (3), 415-429.

Mason-Bish, H. (2019) The concept of positionality in educational research, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51 (6), 629-639.

Masschelein, J. and Ricken, N. (2003) Do we (still) need the concept of Bildung? *Educational philosophy and theory,* 35 (2), 139-154.

Masschelein, J. and Simons, M. (2013) *In defence of the school: a public issue, Education*, Leuven, Culture and Society Publishers.

Maunder, R. and Monks, C.P. (2019) Friendships in middle childhood: Links to peer and school identification, and general self-worth, *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 37, 211-229.

Maxwell, G. S. (2023) Assessment and accountability global trends and future directions in 21st century competencies, *International Encyclopaedia of Education,* 13, 313-320.

McCollow, J. (2012) A controversial reform in indigenous education, The *Australian journal of indigenous education*, 41 (2), 97-109.

McEwan, P. J. (2008) Evaluating multigrade school reform in Latin America, *Comparative Education,* 44, 465-483.

McGillicuddy, D. and Devine, D. (2018) "Turned off" or "ready to fly" – ability grouping as an act of symbolic violence in primary school, *Teaching and teacher education*, 70, 88-99.

McInerney, P. (2009) Toward a critical pedagogy of engagement for alienated youth: insights from Freire and school-based research, *Critical Studies in Education,* 50 (1), 23–35.

McNally, S. A. and Slutsky, R. (2016) Key elements of the Reggio Emilia approach and how they are interconnected to create the highly regarded system of early childhood education, *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(12), 1925–1937.

McNutt, C. (2022) 'Conference to restore humanity 2022!: keynote, Dr. Henry Giroux critical pedagogy in a time of fascist tyranny', in Human restoration project, available at https://www.humanrestorationproject.org/writing/conference-to-restore-humanity-2022-keynote-dr-henry-giroux-critical-pedagogy-in-a-time-of-fascist-tyranny (last accessed 28.01.26).

Mello, A. K. (1993) *Romanticism and gender*, 1st edition, London, Routledge.

Melvin, S. A., Landsberg, E., and Kagan, S. L. (2020). International Curriculum Frameworks: Increasing Equity and Driving Systemic Change. *YC Young Children,* 75(1), 10–21

Merrigan, C. and Senior, J. (2023) Special schools at the crossroads of inclusion: do they have a value, purpose, and educational responsibility in an inclusive education system?, *Irish Educational Studies,* 42 (2), 275-291.

Mesquita, L. (2012) The Lancastrian monitorial system as an education industry with a logic of capitalist valorisation, *Paedagogica Historica*, 48 (5), 661–675.

Mezies L, Yates W and Huband-Thompson B (2023) Balancing act: Navigating the tensions in our schools system, IPPR, available at https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/balancing-act-school-system-august-23.pdf (last accessed 30.01.26).

Miedema, S. (2023) Knowing and the Known: A Philosophical and Pedagogical Critique on the Concept of 'Powerful Knowledge'. *Social Sciences,* 12, 578.

Miller, J. P. (1995) *The Holistic Curriculum*. Toronto, OISE Press.

Miller, P. H. (2011) *Theories of developmental psychology* (5th ed.) New York, Worth Publishers.

Ministry of Education New Zealand (2017) T*e Whāriki Early Childhood Curriculum,* Wellington, Ministry of Education.

Mishra, P. (2023) 'Learning to see complexity: teachers designing amidst indeterminacy', available at https://punyamishra.com/2023/09/05/learning-to-see-complexity-teachers-designing-amidst-indeterminacy/ (last accessed 26.01.26).

Moliner, O. Lozano, J., Aguado, T. and Amiama, J. (2021) Building inclusive and democratic schools in Spain: strategies for mobilising knowledge on inclusive education through participatory action research, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28 (6), 705-722.

Moll, H. (2020) How young children learn from others, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54, 340-355.

Molyneux, T.M., Zeni, M. and Oberle, E. (2022) Choose your won adventure: promoting social and emotional development through outdoor learning, *Early Child Education Journal*, 18, 1–15.

Monfrance, M., Haelermans, C. and Schils, T. (2024) Effects of summer schools: Who benefits the most? *PLOS ONE*, 19 (4).

Montessori, M. (1924) On discipline – reflections and advice, *The Call of Education,* 1 (3).

Montessori, M. (2014) *The Montessori method*, New York, Routledge.

Montessori, M. (2007) *The absorbent mind,* Montessori-Pierson publishing house.

Montessori, M. (2020) *The child in the family*, Montessori-Pierson publishing house.

Moore, A. (2018) Shifting towards multi-age learning. Timeless learning: using zero-based design to rethink school, *Medium*, 9th October, 2018, https://arbay38.medium.com/making-sense-of-multi-age-learning-6b39e442846c (last accessed 27.01.26).

Morris, P. (2012) Pick 'n' mix, select and project; policy borrowing and the quest for 'world class' schooling: an analysis of the 2010 schools White Paper, *Journal of Education Policy,* 27 (1), 89-107.

Morris-Coker, C. B. (2024) *bell hooks: Exploring Intersectionality, Black Feminist Thinking* The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Thinkers, Palgrave, Macmillan.

Morrison, K. A. (2019) A common vision realized: Holistic educators' and utopian visionaries' ideas brought to life, *Critical Education,* 10 (4), 1-18.

Morss, J.R. (2018) *The biologizing of childhood Developmental Psychology and the Darwinian Myth,* Abingdon, Routledge.

Morss, J.R. (1992) Making waves: deconstruction and psychology, *Theory and Psychology*, 2 (4), 445-465.

Morss, J.R. (1996) *Alternatives to developmental psychology*, London, Routledge.

Moss, P. (2007) Bringing politics into the nursery: Early childhood education as a democratic practice, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15 (1), 5–20.

Moss, P. (2013) *Early childhood and compulsory education: Reconceptualising the relationship*, London, Routledge.

Moss, G., Hodgson, A. and Cousin, S. (2023) 'Knowledge, Competences and Curriculum Reform—Why the English Case Stands Out', in Dobryakova, M., Froumin, I., Barannikov, K., Moss, G., Remorenko, I. & Hautamäki, J. (eds) *Key Competences and New Literacies*. Cham, Springer.

Moss, R. H., Edmonds, J A., Hibbard, K A., Manning, M R., Rose, S K., van Vuuren, D P., Carter, T R., Emori, S; Kainuma, M; Kram, T; Meehl, G A., Mitchell, J F. B., Nakicenovic, N; Riahi, K; Smith, S J., Stouffer, R J., Thomson, A M., Weyant, J P., Wilbanks, T J., (2010) The next generation of scenarios for climate change research and assessment, *Nature*, 463, 747-756.

Mouffe, C. 2009. Democracy in a Multipolar World. *Millennium*, 37 (3), 549-561.

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton -Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T., Curran, W. (2015) For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university, *An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14 (4), 1235– 1259.

Mowat, J.G. and Beck, A. (2023) Rising to the Challenge of Creating Equitable, Inclusive, and Compassionate School Communities in the Recovery Phase of the Pandemic: The Role of Aspiring Headteachers, *Education Science* 13, 524.

Muir, T. and Solli, K. 2022. "And Thou Shall Find your Path": The Manifesto in Doctoral Writing Development *Journal of Academic Writing,* 12 (1), 68-85.

Mulholland, M. and O'Connor, U. (2016) Collaborative classroom practice for inclusion: perspectives of classroom teachers and learning support/ resource teachers, *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 20 (10), 1070-1083.

Murray, C. (2021) 'Alternative provision and SEND' in K. Wespieser, and T. Bennett *ResearchED Guide to Special Educational Needs: and evidence informed guide for teachers*, London, John Catt educational ltd.

Murray, J. (2017) 'Young children are human beings', *International journal of early years education*, 25 (4), 339-342.

Murray, R. and O'Brien, L. (2005) Such enthusiasm – a joy to see, *An evaluation of Forest School in England*, Forest Research, London, NEF.

Neill, A. S. (1960) *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

New School, London, https://www.thenewschool.org.uk (last accessed 10.01.2026)

Nganga, L. (2015) Culturally Responsive and Anti-Biased Teaching Benefits Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers, *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, 4 (2), 1-16.

Nicholas, M., Rouse, E., Paatsch, L., Nicholas, M., Rouse, E. and Paatsch, L. (2021) Child-Centred Teaching: Helping Each Child to Reach Their Full Potential, *Education Sciences* 2021, 11, 280.

Nixon, J., Marks, A., Rowland, S. and Walker, M. (2001) Towards a New Academic Professionalism: A manifesto of hope, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22 (2), 227-244.

Noddings, N. (2005a) Identifying and responding to needs in education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35 (2), 147–15.

Noddings, N. (2005b) *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (2nd ed.), Teachers College Press.

Norwich, B. (2008) *Dilemmas of difference, inclusion and disability: International perspectives on placement*, London, Routledge.

Norwich, B. (2013) *Addressing tensions and dilemmas in inclusive education: Living with uncertainty*, London, Routledge.

Norwich, B. and Kelly, N. (2004) Pupils' views on inclusion: Moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools, *British educational research journal*, 30 (1), 43-65.

Norwich, B., and Black, A. (2015) The placement of SEN pupils in English primary schools: trends and determinants, *British Educational Research Journal*, 41 (3), 459-475.

Noteboom, J., and Ross, J. (2024) Speculation: Challenging the invisibility and inevitability of data in education, in A. Buch, Y. Lindberg, and T. Cerratto Pargman (Eds.) *Framing futures in postdigital education: Critical concepts for data-driven practices* (pp. 181–194), Springer.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2011) *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

OECD (2018) *The Future of Education and Skills Education 2030: The Future We Want*, Paris, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2019) *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Conceptual Learning Framework—Concept Note: Student Agency for 2030,* Paris, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2022) *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators,* Paris, OECD Publishing.

Oladele, S. and Jumali, A. (2025) Philosophical Underpinnings of Child-Centered Education: A Comparative Examination of Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia Approaches Across Different Cultural Contexts (May 15), available at SSRN: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5255429 (last accessed 30.01.26).

Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings*, Toronto, Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Owen, R. (1857) *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself: with selections from his writings and correspondence* (vol 1), Effingham Wilson.

Owen, R. (1991) *A new view of society and other writings*, UK, Penguin (Original work published 1813).

Owen, R. D. (1824) *Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark*, Printed at the University Press, for Wardlaw & Cunninghame.

Ozga, J. (2023) Accountability in an age of international testing, *International Encyclopaedia of Education* 4th edition, 13, 306-312.

Ozouf, M. (1984) *L'École, l'Église et la République: 1871–1914*, Paris, Gallimard.

PACEY (2015) available at https://www.pacey.org.uk (last accessed 29.08.24)

Palmér, H., Björklund, C., Reikerås, E. and Elofsson, J. (2024) Teaching Mathematics as to be Meaningful–Foregrounding Play and Children's Perspectives: *Results from the POEM5 Conference, 2022,* Cham, Springer Nature.

Panafiel, L.D. and Tomas, R.B. (2015) What can be learned from Spanish rural schools? Conclusions from an international project, *International journal of educational research,* 74, 114-126.

Patston, T. J., Kaufman, J. C., Cropley, A. J., and Marrone, R. (2021) What Is Creativity in Education? A Qualitative Study of International Curricula, *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 32 (2), 207-230.

Pellegrini, A. D. (2005) *Recess: Its role in education and development*. Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pennacchia, J. and Thomson, P. (2016) Complementing the mainstream: an exploration of partnership work between complementary alternative provisions and mainstream schools, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 34 (2), 67-78.

Percival, A. (2020) 'Curriculum building in a primary school', in C. Sealy and T. Bennett (Eds.), *The researchED guide to the curriculum,* Woodbridge, John Catt Education Ltd, pp. 71-84.

Pestalozzi, J. H. (1894) *How Gertrude teaches her children* (L. E. Holland and F. C. Turner, Tran.) Swan Sonnenschein and Co. (Original work published 1801)

Piaget, J. (1926) *The Language and Thought of the Child* (Preface by J. Dewey), London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Trubner.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*, New York, International Universities Press

Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1973) *Memory and Intelligence* (A. J. Pomeranz Trans.), New York, Basic Books.

Pimlott-Wilson, H. and Coates, J. (2019) Rethinking learning? Challenging and accommodating neoliberal educational agenda in the integration of Forest School into mainstream educational settings, Loughborough University.

Plowden, B. (1967) Children and their primary schools: A report of the central advisory council for education (England); volume 1: the report, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London https://education-uk.org/documents/plowden/plowden1967-1.html (last accessed 28.01.26).

Pohlmann-Rother, S., Wehner, F. and Kaiser-Kratzmann, J., (2024) Transitions to primary school: school entry decisions, parents' and teachers' ideas about school readiness, and cooperation between preschools, primary schools, and parents, Educational Processes, Decisions, and the Development of Competencies from Early Preschool Age to Adolescence: Findings from the BiKS Cohort Panel Studies, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, 191-217.

Poland, M. and van Oers, B. (2007) Effects of schematising on mathematical development, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15, 2, 269 – 293.

Power, S., Bridgeman, J., Duffy, G., McCluskey, G., Tawell, A. and Taylor, A. (2025) Outsourcing Trouble: A Home International Comparison of Alternative Provision Across the UK, *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 73, 429-448.

Power, S., Taylor, C. and Newton, N. (2020) 'Successful futures' for all in Wales? The challenges of curriculum reform for addressing educational inequalities. *Curriculum Journal* 31 (2), 317-333.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., and Robinson, S. (2012) Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach. London, Bloomsbury.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. and Robinson, S. (2015) 'Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?' in R. Kneyber and J. Evers (eds.), *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Bottom Up,* London, Routledge.

Pritchett, L. and Beatty, A. (2015) Slow down, you're going too fast: Matching curricula to student skill levels*, International journal of educational development*, 40, 276-288.

Prospero (2023) 'The pros and cons of using age-related expectations in UK schools', available at https://www.prosperoteaching.com/blog/2023/03/the-pros-and-cons-of-using-age-related-expectations-in-uk-schools (last accessed 27.01.26)

Purdam, K., Troncoso, P., Morales-Gómez, A., and Leckie, G. (2024) Local geographic variations in children's school readiness-a multilevel analysis of the development gaps in England, *Child Indicators Research,* 17 (1), 145-176.

Quirk, M. (2024) 'Education: the great equaliser or a divider?' In Psychology today, available at https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/deciphering-our-differences/202405/education-the-great-equaliser-or-a-

divider#:~:text=Horace%20Mann%2C%20a%20pioneer%20of,out%20the%20disparities%20between%20people (last accessed 28.01.26).

Quon, S., Nichols, E. and Tan, J. (2025) Gendered Norms and the Evolution of Early Childhood Education: Historical Influences and Pathways for Change, *Theory and Practice in Child Development*, 5, 26-37.

Qureshi, S. (2011) *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Ranciere, J. (1987) *Le maitre ignorant cinq lecons sur l'emanicipation intellectuelle,* Paris, Librarie Artheme Fayard.

Raymond, P. (2018) Terror versus soul: The struggle for creativity in primary Initial Teacher Education, *Research in Education*, 100 (1), 130-147.

Richardson, L., and St. Pierre, E. A. (2005) Writing: A method of inquiry, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), T*he SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Sage, 959–978.

Riddle, S. and Hickey, A. (2023) Reclaiming relationality in education policy: towards a more authentic relational pedagogy, *Critical Studies in Education*, 64 (3), 267-282.

Rinaldi, C. (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning,* London, Routledge.

Rios, C., Neilson, A. L. and Menezes, I. (2021) COVID-19 and the desire of children to return to nature: Emotions in the face of environmental and intergenerational injustices, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 52 (5), 335–346.

Rizvi, F. and Lingard, B. (2009) *Globalizing education policy,* London, Routledge.

Robbins, A. (2024) 'The problems with pace', Reflections on Education, online, available at https://adam-robbins.com/2024/01/07/the-problems-with-pace (last accessed 28.01.26).

Roberts-Holmes, G. (2021) *The Datafication of Early Years Education and Care: 'If the Teaching Is Right, the Data Should Be Good'* (2nd ed.), London, Routledge.

Roberts-Holmes, G. and Bradbury, A. (2017) Neo-liberalism, the audit culture and early childhood education, *British Educational Research Journal,* 43 (3), 521–535.

Robinson, K. (2006) Do schools kill creativity? [Video], *TED Conferences,* https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity (last accessed 30.01.26).

Robinson, K. (2009) *The element: how finding your passion changes everything,* London, Penguin.

Robinson, K. (2015) *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education,* London, Penguin Books.

Robinson, K. (2019) 'Standardisation broke education. Here's how we can fix our schools' in *Wired*, available at https://www.wired.com/story/education-personalisation/ (last accessed 29.01.26).

Robinson, K. (2021) 'Why schools need to embrace kids' creativity', Ted Talk, 21 June 2021, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4IAa8wZlqU (last accessed 26.01.26).

Rogers, S. and Rose, J. (2007) Ready for Reception? The advantages and disadvantages of single-point entry to school, *Early years,* 27 (1), 47-63.

Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*, London, Oxford University Press.

Rogoff, B (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, London, Oxford University Press.

Rose, N. (2009) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1991) *Emile or On Education,* London, Penguin.

Ruitenberg, C. (2009) Introduction: The question of method in philosophy of education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* 43 (3), 315–323.

Ruscoe, A., Barblett, L., and Barratt-Pugh, C. (2023) Discourses in power: Policy and curriculum demands in the first year of compulsory school. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 24 (3), 298-312.

Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L. (2000) Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being, *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 68–78.

Sahlberg, P. (2007) Education policies for raising student learning: the Finnish approach, *Journal of Education Policy*, 22 (2), 147-171.

Sahlberg, P. (2011) *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* New York, Teachers College Press.

Santrock, J. W. (2018) *Educational Psychology* (6th ed.) McGraw-Hill Education.

Sardar, Z. (2010) Welcome to postnormal times, *Futures*, 42 (5), 435-444.

Scherer, R. and Nilson, T. (2023) Accountability for the future? International testing and future directions, *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, 13, 324-337.

Schwab, J. (1983) The Practical 4: Something for Curriculum Professors to Do, *Curriculum Inquiry 13* (3), 239–65.

Scottish Government. (2004) *Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum* 3, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.

Sealy, C. (2020) in C. Sealy and T. Bennett (eds) *The researched Guide to the curriculum: an evidence-informed guide for teachers,* London, John Catt education ltd.

Sefa Dei, G. J. and Cacciavillani, A. (2024) Actualizing decolonization: a case for anticolonizing and indigenizing the curriculum, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 58, 209–226.

Sharp, C. (1995) What's age got to do with it? A study of patterns of school entry and the impact of season of birth on school attainment, *Educational research*, 37 (3) 251-265.

Sharp, C., Hutchinson, D. and Whetton, C. (1994) How do season of birth and length of schooling affect children's attainment at key stage 1? *Educational research*, 36 (2), 107-121.

Sigmundsson, H., Haga, M., Elnes, M., Dybendal, B.H. and Hermundsdottir, F (2022) Motivational Factors Are Varying across Age Groups and Gender, *International Journal of Environmental Research,* Public Health, 19, 5207.

Silber, K. (1965) *Pestalozzi: The Man and His Work,* Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Singh, S., Morrison-Love, D., Makara-Fuller, K., Bendall, R., Brychan, A., Borquez-Sanchez, E., Cathcart, S., Eleri, S., Farrer, J., Hadley, S., Hughes, S., Holloway, J., Morgan, C., Patrick, F., Roberts, J., Ryder, N., Sharpling, E., Valdera-Gil, F., Wiseman-Orr, L. (2025)

Working with a process approach to Curriculum for Wales: 'I can now be the teacher I always wanted to be.' University of Glasgow and University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

Sisson, J. H., Whitington, V., and Shin, A. M. (2020) "Teaching Culture Through Culture": A Case Study of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies in an Australian Early Childhood/Primary Context, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 34 (1), 108–126.

Sleeter, C. E. (2011) *The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review*, Washington, National Education Association.

Smith, A. H. (2022) Born too late? How relative age affects college enrolment patterns, *Research in post-compulsory education,* 27, 525-548.

Smith, K., Gamlem, S. M., Sandal, A. K. and Engelsen, K. S. (2016) Educating for the future: A conceptual framework of responsive pedagogy, *Cogent Education,* 3(1).

Smith, L. T. (2012) *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.), Zed Books.

Socol, I., Moran, P. and Ratliff, C. (2018) *Timeless learning: How imagination, observation, and zero-based thinking change schools*, San Francisco, John Wiley and Sons.

Stobart, G. (2021) 'Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: a comparative perspective' *OECD Education working papers no. 253*, available at https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/d8785ddf-en.pdf?expires=1725141013&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=ABAD56A51420501C1C35EA18F8732C0A (last accessed 28.08.24)

Suissa, J. H. J. (2022) Creating and sustaining democratic spaces in education. *The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, 56, 939-942.

Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., and Carver-Thomas, D (2016) A coming crisis in teaching: teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the US, *Learner policy institute*.

Sword, H. (2009) Writing higher education differently: a manifesto on style, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (3), 319–336.

Sword, H. (2009b) *The Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Writing*, Allen and Unwin.

Sword, H. (2009c) The radical pedagogy of narrative: Imagining alternative futures in education, *Journal of Educational Change,* 10 (2), 197-212.

Tack, S. (2022) Teaching for Liberation: The Manifesto Assignment as an Example of bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy, *Australian Feminist Studies,* 37 (113), 317-333.

Taylor, A. (2011) Reconceptualising the 'nature' of childhood, *Childhood*, 18 (4), 420–433.

Taylor, A. and Giugni, M. (2012) Common Worlds: Reconceptualising Inclusion in Early Childhood Communities, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood,* 13 (2), 108-119.

Taylor, A., Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. and Blaise, M. (2024) The common worlds research collective, available at https://www.commonworlds.net/about-the-collective (last accessed 28.01.26).

Taylor, C. (2012) *Improving Alternative Provision*, London, Department for Education, DfE.

Thomson, P. & Pennacchia, J., (2014) *What's the alternative? Effective support for young people disengaging from mainstream education*, London, The Prince's Trust.

Tisdall, L. (2020) *A Progressive Education: how childhood changed in mid-twentieth-century English and Welsh schools,* Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Tourigny, R., Plante, I. and Raby, C. (2020) Do students in a looping classroom get higher grades and report a better teacher-student relationship than those in a traditional setting? *Educational Studies,* 46 (6), 744-759.

Trohler, D. (2013) *Pestalozzi and the Educationalization of the world,* Palgrave McMillan.

Ullucci, K., and Battey, D. (2011) Exposing color blindness/grounding color consciousness: Challenges for teacher education, *Urban Education,* 46 (6), 1195-1225.

UNESCO (2014) *Teaching and learning: Achieving quality for all*, Paris, UNESCO.

UNICEF (2013) *UNICEF annual report 2012: for every child, reimagine*, UK, UNICEF

Van Crombrugge, H. (1995) Rousseau on Family and Education, *Paedagogica Historica,* 31 (2), 445-480.

van Oers, B., and Poland, M. (2007) Schematising activities as a means for young children to think abstractly, *Mathematics Education Research Journal*, 19, 10–22.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souberman, Eds. and Trans.), Harvard University Press.

Waite, S., Bølling, M., Bentsen, P. (2016) Comparing apples and pears? A conceptual framework for understanding forms of outdoor learning through comparison of English Forest Schools and Danish udeskole *Environmental Education Research,* 22 (6), 868-892.

Walkerdine, V. (1990) *Schoolgirl Fictions*, London, Verso.

Walkerdine, V., Burman, E. & Gidley, J. (eds.) (2007) *Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Feminism, Poststructuralism and Critical Theory,* London, Routledge.

Warnes, E., Done, E. J. and Knowler, H. (2021) Mainstream teachers' concerns about inclusive education for children with special educational needs and disability in England under pre-pandemic conditions, *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 22, 31-43.

Webb, P. T. & Kirby, M. M. (2019) Neoliberalism, ability and the constitution of the enterprising self in education, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 40 (2), 206–220.

Welsh Government. (2015) *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales,* Cardiff, Welsh Government.

Whetton, C. (2009) A brief history of testing time: national curriculum assessment in England 1989-2008, *Education Research*, 51 (2), 137-159.

White, J. (2018) *What Schools Are For and Why*, London, UCL Institute of Education Press.

Whitebread, D., Neale, D., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Solis, S.L., Hopkins, E., Hirsh-Pasek, K. Zosh, J. M. (2017) '*The role of play in children's development: a review of the evidence (research summary)'* The LEGO Foundation.

Williams, J., and Smith, L. (2020) Uneven Progress? Regional Variations in the Implementation of the New Curriculum in Wales, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52 (1), 75–89.

Williamson, B. & Piattoeva, N. (2022) Education governance and datafication, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 47 (3), 1–12.

Winter, C. (2017) Curriculum policy reform in an era of technical accountability: 'fixing' curriculum, teachers and students in English schools, *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 49 (1), 55–74.

Woodin, T. (2007) 'Chuck out the teacher': radical pedagogy in the community, International Journal of Lifelong Education, 26 (1), 89-104.

Wrigley, T. (2019) Student well-being as a key strand of school development, *Improving Schools*, 22 (1), 3-3.

Wyse, D., and Bradbury, A. (2022) The passion, pedagogy and politics of reading, *English in Education,* 56 (3), 247–260.

Wyse, D., Bradbury, A. and Trollope, R. (2022) 'Assessment for children's learning: a new future for primary education', final report, *Independent commission on assessment in primary education,* available at https://icape.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/reports-research/ve0H3SJbVBt7OYEGqC1ZgWFaWmsAkWk4CLOMxJfm.pdf (last accessed 28.01.26)

Wyse, D., Hayward, L. and Pandya, J. (2016) *The SAGE Handbook of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Young, M. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From Social Constructivism to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education*, London, Routledge.

Young, M. (2011) The return to subjects: A sociological perspective on the UK Coalition Government's approach to the curriculum, *The Curriculum Journal*, 22 (2), 265–268.

Young, M. & Muller, J. (2013) On the powers of powerful knowledge, *Review of Education*, 1 (3), 229–250.

Young, M. (2020) 'From powerful knowledge to the powers of knowledge', in C. Sealy and T. Bennett (Eds.), *The researchED guide to the curriculum*, Woodbridge, John Catt Education Ltd, 19-31.

Yunkaporta, T. (2019) *Sand talk: How Indigenous thinking can save the world,* Australia, Text Publishing.

Yunkaporta, T. (2023) *Right Story, Wrong Story: Adventures in Indigenous Thinking,* Australia, Text Publishing Company.

Zech, M. (2023) *Handbook of research on Waldorf education,* London, Routledge.