



# Developing Children's Agency within a Children's Rights Education Framework: Ten Propositions

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# Starting point for the book

“What implications follow for teaching in schools if our starting point is that children are rights holders and teachers are duty bearers?” (p. viii)

# End point

“If the right to education is an enabling right, opening the door to the realization of other rights, then teaching might be said to achieve a multiplier effect, through which one person’s optimism and commitment to make a difference can be multiplied through their students. We do not underestimate the challenge, but neither should we underestimate the potential.”

(p. 252)

## Children’s Rights Education in Diverse Classrooms

Pedagogy, Principles and Practice

Lee Jerome and Hugh Starkey



# Nurturing children's agency

- ➔ We understand agency as a capacity to do things, to act on the world and to make a difference (Oswell, 2012)
- ➔ “Children may resist, or refuse to recognise themselves, in adults’ definitions – and in this respect, adult power is very far from absolute or uncontested. Nevertheless, their space for resistance is largely that of interpersonal relationships, amid the ‘micro-politics’ of the family or the classroom” (Buckingham, 2000).
- ➔ The question for educators is whether their schools and classrooms only encourage these negative forms of noncompliance or whether they will also nurture more productive and purposeful positive acts of citizenship.
- ➔ Teachers are generally capable of scaffolding experiences in order to help students make progress towards levels of achievement that are beyond their current attainment. CRE teaching has children’s agency as an explicit objective and a powerful pedagogy.

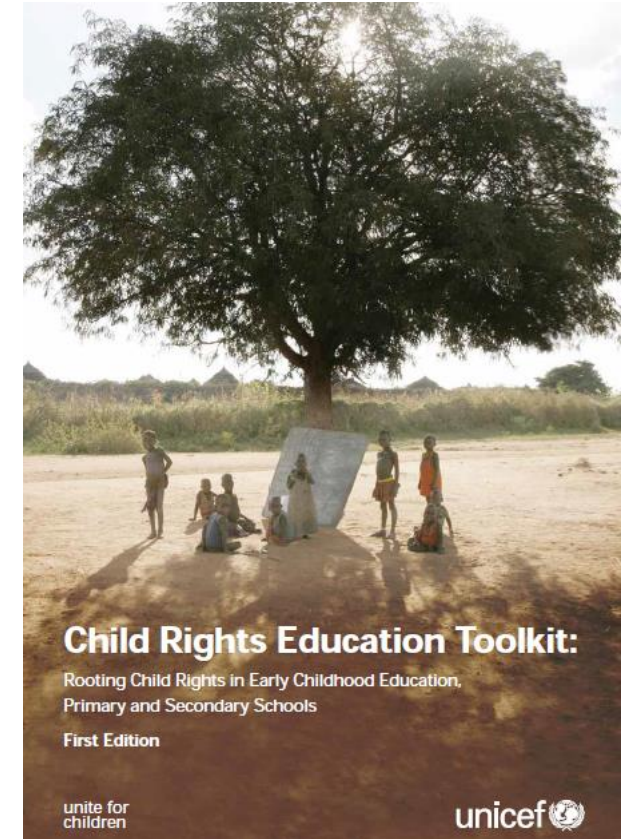
# Children's agency and the UNCRC (1/2)

- ➔ Governments & authorities must 'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' ([UNCRC](#), Article 12).
- ➔ Education should provide children with the 'knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights' ([UNDHRET](#), Article 2).
- ➔ 'Article 29 insists upon the need for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering, and it highlights the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates... The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No.1](#), parag.2).



# Children's agency and the UNCRC (2/2)

- ➔ CRE requires 'teaching and learning about the provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 'child rights approach' in order to empower both adults and children to take action to advocate for and apply these at the family, school, community, national and global levels' ([UNICEF CRE Toolkit](#), 2014: 20).
- ➔ The toolkit also begins to use the language of agency to refer to:
  - ➔ the need for adults to respect the agency of children (106),
  - ➔ to build children's sense of their own agency (115),
  - ➔ and their actual ability to exercise agency (147).
- ➔ The [General Day of Discussion](#) (2018) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that: 'States should take all appropriate measures to create safe spaces for child human rights defenders' and 'should recognize the role of education in the empowerment of children as human rights defenders.'



# Proposition 1: Agency can be nurtured through adult-child relationships

- ➔ Teachers understand their role in transforming students' capacities (for literacy, numeracy etc.) – the same can be said for agency.
- ➔ Freire encourages us to acknowledge that teachers have authority in the content to be learned, but not in all social relationships.
- ➔ Adults need to wean themselves off absolute authority in the classroom, but they also need to acknowledge the power imbalance in order to avoid hypocrisy.
- ➔ Teachers must commit to seeing agency as developed over time, not as a capacity that students do / do not have.

# Proposition 2: Agency can also be nurtured through cultures of child-child relationships

- ➔ Freinet engages with the power of cooperation to enable children to develop agency through their own relationships.
- ➔ “Freedom is not the starting point. Freedom is the result of the new co-operative organisation of the work of the class” (Freinet, 1984).
- ➔ Cooperative classes undertake at least one major project each school year and in doing so they can achieve something real (to be contrasted with the illusory choices offered in many classroom between teacher choice A and teacher choice B) (Freire, 1970).

# Proposition 3: We need to promote forms of coalitional agency

- ➔ Children are often moved by the injustices experienced by others but schools often channel this into a form of charity.
- ➔ By contrast, coalitional agency seeks to understand and work with / in the service of others, rather than provide charity.
- ➔ “Human Rights Education... cannot stop with acquiring information, but should lead to courageous and collective action in solidarity with victims” (Devi, 2010).
- ➔ “Coalitional agency” means children come to appreciate that they are, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr. “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality” (Bajaj, 2018).



# Proposition 4: Whilst agency is concerned with actions in the world we also have to attend to feelings of efficacy

- ➔ Internal efficacy refers to the internal belief that one can and should act to make a difference. External efficacy refers to the belief that government or others in authority would respond to such citizen action, especially from someone like oneself.
- ➔ It is possible for an education project to enhance one at the expense of the other (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006).
- ➔ One teaching strategy is to prepare young people explicitly to engage with opposition and to plan ahead about when they will encounter obstacles.
- ➔ Schools can also use placements or collaborations with organisations and campaigners who have already established relationships with those in authority.

# Proposition 5: Agency can generate a virtuous cycle

- ➔ Involvement may start for a whole variety of reasons, but once young people are participating, they often develop a stronger sense of efficacy, and come to identify themselves as the kind of person who gets involved and tries to make a difference (Montague and Eiroa-Orosa 2017).
- ➔ Participation does not simply help to achieve the political goal, nor should it only be valued because it generates valuable political learning, but it should also be appreciated for contributing to well-being.
- ➔ Research repeatedly indicates a positive correlation between children's self-reported participation and well-being.

# Proposition 6: Rights should be prioritised over responsibilities

- ➔ Focusing on teaching about responsibilities rather than rights, in order to regulate children's behaviour, has been described as 'miseducation' where children come to think their rights are entirely contingent on their own good behaviour (Howe and Covell, 2010).
- ➔ "Children who are taught about their contemporaneous rights and responsibilities in classrooms and in schools that respect those rights by allowing meaningful participation are children who display moral and socially responsible behaviours and feel empowered to act." (Covell et al., 2008)
- ➔ As one teacher put it, some children are "weighed down with goodness" and need to be taught how to assert their rights (Howe and Covell, 2010).

# Proposition 7: Agency can be thickened or thinned

- ➔ A child centred approach recognising children as citizens and rights holders involves developing opportunities to participate and encouraging critical reflection on structures and processes (Hart et al. 2014).
- ➔ Thinking about children's agency in terms of how particular situations thicken or thin their agency (Robson et al., 2007) helps us to consider the educational dimension.

# Proposition 8: Institutions and processes can foster ecological agency

- Teachers need to move beyond the tendency to see agency as the innate capacity of individuals to act (Erss 2018) and instead conceptualise agency as a complex, temporally situated, interplay of forces and elements (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).
- An ecological approach encourages us to review how schools as institutions work to enable or close down children's agency.
- Student Voice needs to include:
  - Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
  - Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.
  - Audience: The view must be listened to.
  - Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007).



# Proposition 9: Agency is also negotiated

- ➔ In authoritarian contexts acts of 'everyday resistance' or 'constructive noncompliance' may be legitimated as providing a form of feedback to the authorities on badly framed laws (Tsai 2015).
- ➔ Much significant reform is triggered by people taking unsanctioned action that has been called transformative citizenship (Banks 2008).
- ➔ Young people will exercise their agency in these ways and adults need to be prepared to negotiate. There is a long history of school strikes (Cunningham & Lavalette, 2016) leading up to the School Strikes for Climate.
- ➔ They can lead to transformed school relationships or stifle citizenship (Mead, 2010).

# Proposition 10: The 3 Ps of children's rights co-exist, they are not sequential or optional

- Children's rights are often referred to by the shorthand of the 3 Ps – referring to provision rights, protection rights and participation rights.
- A well-intentioned focus on the protection of children can lead to paternalistic approaches which are overprotective and conflict with the view we promote here of children as competent agents whatever their age (Stoeckelin & Bonvin, 2014).
- The COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures in England in 2020 demonstrated how a concern for protection can inhibit or prevent participation.
- [UNESCO and the Council of Europe](#) (2021) have documented the decline in student voice activities around the world resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

# A Case Study: Community Organising at Hendon School





# Developing a voice



# Listening





# Working in the community



# Campaigning



#HandsUp4  
#HealthyMinds

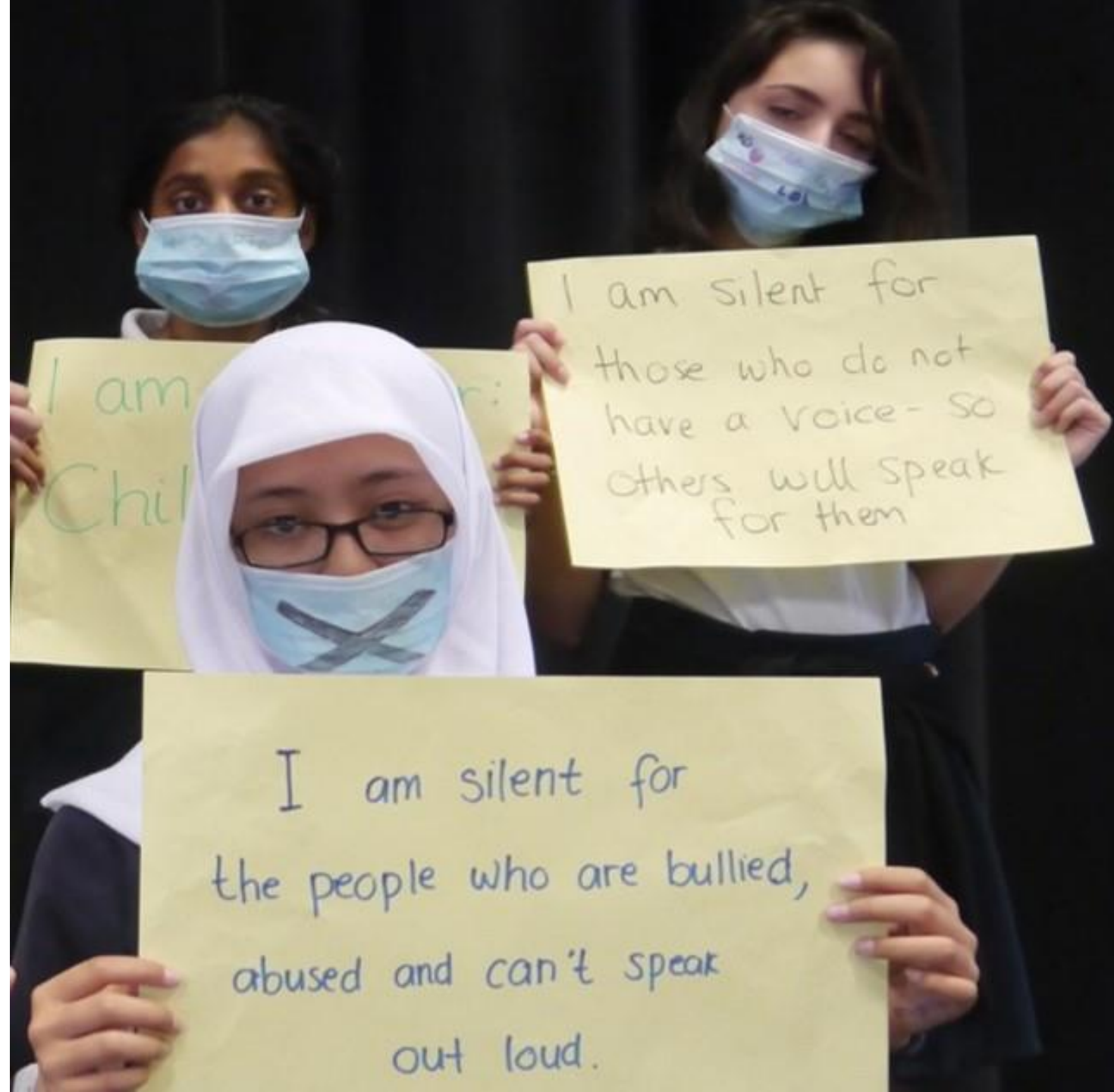
Teachers and staff receive physical first aid training. We believe mental health is just as important as physical health and they should both be approached the same way.

Jayna and Nora, Year 10  
Hendon School





# Showing solidarity



# Having fun





# Being realistic about power and who has it





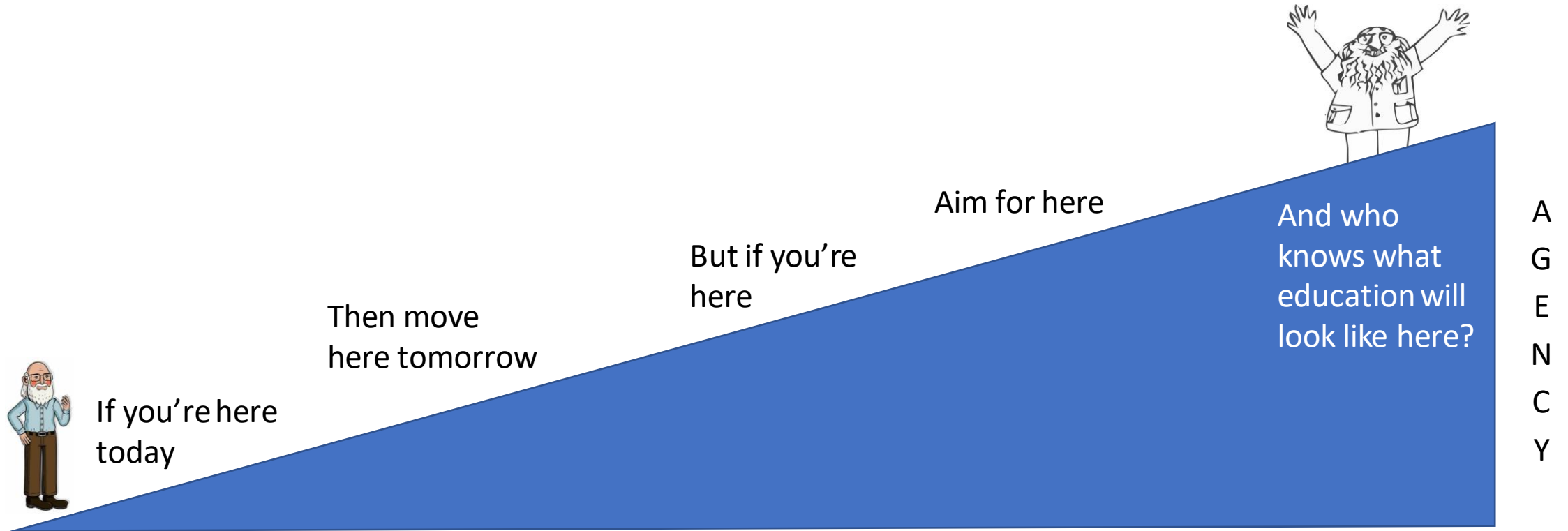


# Conclusion

“The CRE approach does not assume children have all the information and capabilities required to exercise agency effectively in all matters, rather it works with children to nurture and develop their agency. It follows that, in schools where children cannot exercise their agency, responsibility for the remedy lies with the adults as duty bearers.”

“We think of children’s agency as a sliding scale from minimal to maximal, but where an individual child sits on that scale depends as much on the adults and the institutional context as it does on their own innate maturity or level of development.”

# CRE as a journey to 'thicken children's agency'



# Follow up reading

## A short read

Noelle Doona's case study of Hendon School's work is free to download here:

[www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/teaching-citizenship-journal-issue-49/](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/teaching-citizenship-journal-issue-49/)

## A moderate read

My journal article with Hugh Starkey developing the ideas I've shared today is free to download here:

[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2022.2052233](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2022.2052233)

## A long read

My book with Hugh Starkey is available (for sale) here:

[www.bloomsbury.com/uk/childrens-rights-education-in-diverse-classrooms-9781350062825/](http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/childrens-rights-education-in-diverse-classrooms-9781350062825/)