

# Chapter 13

## Finding Worlds Worth Living in



Stephen Kemmis and Kathleen Mahon

**Abstract** This chapter discusses diverse views of worlds worth living in, as described by different groups of students, young people, and adults. It also highlights how the project of research and writing that produced this volume is an example of critical praxis: history making action directed towards realising the good for humankind. Perhaps, in this, it is an example of what Anna Stetsenko calls a ‘transformative activist stance’. In researching and articulating views of worlds worth living in, the contributors to the volume, and the participants with whom they spoke, not only began to imagine worlds worth living in, they also began to realise them.

**Keywords** World worth living in · Deep listening · Transformative activist stance · Critical praxis · Social justice

### Diverse Views of Worlds Worth Living In

From their deep listening, contributors to this volume have articulated diverse views about what constitutes a world worth living in. Some chapters have identified the views of students or refugees or young people about the kinds of worlds *they* think would be worth living in. Some chapters have also identified the kinds of processes needed to help people articulate their views about worlds worth living in. In some chapters, educators have articulated what they think a world worth living in might be like. And some chapters give researchers’ views about the kind of research needed to bring into being worlds worth living in.

---

S. Kemmis (✉)  
Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia  
e-mail: [stephen@stephenkemmis.com](mailto:stephen@stephenkemmis.com)

K. Mahon  
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia  
e-mail: [k.mahon@uq.edu.au](mailto:k.mahon@uq.edu.au)

## The Views of Participants

In many chapters of this volume, authors have listened to and reported the voices of different kinds of young people and adults about worlds *they* think are worth living in. As participants in these investigations of worlds worth living in, students and others are not only envisaging futures in which injustices and obstacles to better worlds are overcome, they are also showing ways in which they *can be* overcome. Through their collective efforts, they are already realising, or beginning to realise, more just, inclusive, and sustainable futures.

In Chap. 3, for example, Susan Groundwater-Smith advocates research that captures and amplifies students' voices; the students she talked to said they wanted to be agentic so they can successfully construct the futures they want to realise. Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund (Chap. 4) reports that small village schools give students "roots", a sense of safety and of belonging to a place with its own local culture and history, and also "wings", a sense of their own growth. Virginia Moller (Chap. 5) explains that students in Steiner schools develop a sense of agency that reveals a deep understanding of the processes of life; a caring love for people, plants, and animals; and a subtle understanding of the forces at work in the world at large. In Chap. 6, Christine Edwards-Groves echoes the voices of young Australian Aboriginal men who hope for a world in which they are heard, valued, and trusted, and in which they can lead fulfilling lives that embrace their Aboriginal identities, communities, cultures, and knowledge. Catherine Burgess, Christine Grice, and Julian Wood (Chap. 7) call for strenuous efforts to ensure that the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal people are recognised and responded to in deliberations about education, especially Aboriginal education. Sally Windsor and Master of Educational Research student Amoni Kitooke (Chap. 8) report on projects undertaken by participants in this Master's degree course. They explore aspects of a world worth living in and conclude that such a world offers people opportunities for (1) civic political engagement; (2) both interdependence and dependence in terms of connections with others and meeting everyone's basic needs; (3) both "flow and slow" paces in life in terms of having meaningful work to accomplish valued ends while also doing it at a sustainable pace that preserves their mental health; and (4) equitable access for all to sufficient resources necessary for living a reasonable life. Sally Morgan (Chap. 9) shares the views of asylum-seeking tertiary students whose opportunities to live well are impeded by a range of practical, political, and legal obstacles; they want worlds in which they can act transformatively together, "conjuring up" relational and collective agency, to overcome the disempowering discourses of governments. Nick Haswell, Mervi Kaukko, Marte Knag Fylkesnes and Paul Sullivan (Chap. 10) share voices of young people in Finland, Norway, and Scotland, who have arrived in those countries as unaccompanied minors and as refugees. They want a world in which they are cared for and can care for others, where they are listened to and can listen to others, where they feel safe and can help others feel safe. Nick Hopwood, Chris Elliot, Jessica Gowans, and Kate Disher-Quill (Chap. 11) report the story of seven-year-old Henry, who feeds by tube. Henry and his family have broken through the deficit discourses

that usually attend tube feeding (e.g., focussed on concerns about the adequacy of nutrition and weight gain) to the transformative extent that cooking and food have become sources of joy in Henry's life. He says the kitchen is his "favrote place". And in Chap. 12, Tomi Kiilakoski and Mikko Piispa call for an ecological transformation to address the pressing climate emergency and to build sustainable futures locally and globally. They also want a world that fosters and renews hope in young people.

## Processes to Help Articulate People's Views About Worlds Worth Living In

A strong communitarian theme runs through these advocacies: a sense that building a world worth living in is a collective enterprise, which must be participatory, inclusive, and democratic. On this view, part of what 'a world worth living in' means is that it engages people reflexively (as both subjects and objects) in participatory and collective processes of self-realisation, through collective self-expression, self-development, and self-determination.

In Chap. 6, Edwards-Groves, like Burgess, Grice and Wood in Chap. 7, reminds us of the importance of centring Aboriginal voices and respecting and embracing Aboriginal knowledge, especially in endeavouring to understand how best to support Aboriginal youth in appropriately leading learning in schools and Aboriginal communities. Both chapters stress the importance of deep listening with respect to the voices of Indigenous people. Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund (Chap. 4) describes the experiences of freedom and relatedness that give students "wings" to grow, and the experiences of safety, proximity, and connections to their own culture and history that give students "roots" in their communities. Sally Windsor and Amoni Kitooke (Chap. 8) describe how a course created a community of practice to conduct research in which students could study aspects of what a world worth living in might be. Sally Morgan (Chap. 9) reports initiatives with asylum-seeking tertiary students who also advocate forming connections and networks to build collective agency for building more equitable life conditions for everyone. Youth researchers Tomi Kiilakoski and Mikko Piispa (Chap. 12) call for participatory, inclusive, and democratic processes of transformation that engage young people in working to build what they describe as "everyday utopias", informed both by critique and by hope. These processes should be realised as hopeful, sustainable forms of life that will continue to contribute to global transformation. In Chap. 11, Nick Hopwood, Henry and Jessica Gowans, Kate Disher-Quill, and Chris Elliot advocate for research that takes a *transformative activist stance* (Stetsenko, 2017) and promotes people's agency in overcoming deficit discourses and creating discursive, material, and social conditions that realise worlds worth living in.

These views of the kinds of processes that help to realise worlds worth living in demonstrate that the authors contributing to this volume are already working in ways that give life to those processes. Processes of articulating people's ideas about worlds worth living in are not just a preparation for a distant future, but bring that future into being.

## Research to Realise Worlds Worth Living In

As already suggested, several contributors to this volume have advocated establishing sustainable processes of research that investigate and articulate what different groups of people think constitutes a world worth living in. Susan Groundwater-Smith (Chap. 3) echoes this view, drawing on her experience of research articulating student voice. Christine Edwards-Groves (Chap. 6) suggests that a central aim for researchers is to help bring into being worlds worth living in, both by listening to marginalised and subaltern groups, and by giving voice to their hopes and aspirations. The young people interviewed by Tomi Kiilakoski and Mikko Piispa (Chap. 12) also call for research that gives young people a voice, including research like their own, which was conducted by (and with) young people. This message also reverberates through Sally Morgan's Chap. 9 about asylum-seeking tertiary students who also want to build research networks to help them realise better lives for themselves—and for all. In Chap. 8, Sally Windsor and Amoni Kitooke advocate for building communities of practice that conduct research to bring better worlds into existence for everyone. Significantly, the participants in the research reported are co-authors, which not only challenges the power imbalance we usually see between author/researcher and research participant, but also lifts their voices to another level as they represent themselves. Nick Hopwood, Henry and Jessica Gowans, Kate Disher-Quill, and Chris Elliot (Chap. 11) push beyond *hope* for a better world, by making better worlds *happen* through research that takes a transformative activist stance.

These contributing authors show that they are already conducting the kinds of research that they believe can help to create worlds worth living in.

## Educators' Views About Worlds Worth Living In

Education, as the contributors to this volume see it, is not a process of preparing children, young people, and adults with knowledge, capabilities, and values for *future* participation in their communities' and societies' cultures, economies, environments, and social and political life; it is a process of bringing about good for each person and the good for humankind in the *present* everyday life and practices of schools and other educational institutions. The volume reveals a variety of ways in which educators and educational researchers think about education as a process that brings into being worlds worth living in (although the consequences of educational processes sometimes turn out to be otherwise).

In Chap. 2, Stephen Kemmis argues that education has a double purpose: the good for each person, and the good for humankind (and for the community of life). He thinks that education should foster individual and collective self-expression, to realise a culture based on reason; individual and collective self-development, to realise productive and sustainable economies and environments; and individual and collective self-determination, to realise just and democratic societies. In Chap. 4,

Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund discusses the accomplishments of small village schools that do not just teach about, but model and embody living well in a world worth living in their communities. Virginia Moller (Chap. 5) presents a view of Steiner education, which employs a “pedagogy of love”, “of life”, and “of wisdom”, which, she argues, is evident in students’ developing understandings, capabilities, and values, including in their hope for the ecological future of the planet, and their deep understandings of the processes of life; their caring love of people, plants, and animal life; and their wise understanding of the forces at work in the world at large. In Chap. 12, Tomi Kiilakoski and Mikko Piispa argue for education for ecological transformation to address the climate emergency and bring into being sustainable futures.

## Realising the Vision(s)

As this brief review of the content of this volume suggests, the contributors are not merely imagining some future, some better world, and inviting others to imagine such things, they are already taking steps towards realising worlds worth living in. With the help of those they have been listening to, they see the untoward consequences of the ways people now live and work; they conduct critiques to identify the conditions that generate these untoward consequences; they imagine the “everyday utopias” (Kiilakoski & Piispa) that make possible alternative ways of being; and they begin to realise those ways of being in order to see what it means to live well in these worlds worth living in. In their different ways, they are thus, with others, living *critical praxis*, and giving life and breath to the “transformative activist stance” advocated by Stetsenko (2017).

## Critical Praxis and the Transformative Activist Stance

For some years, the authors of this chapter, along with other contributors to this volume, have engaged with the notion of critical praxis to draw attention to and understand the moral-political dimensions of education and research (e.g., Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Mahon et al., 2020). The stories shared in this volume personify critical praxis in the senses of

- history making action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Mahon et al., 2020): they embody both *critique* of inherited histories so that we might better understand people’s circumstances, and *action* aimed at making the kind of histories they consider socially just, sustainable, safe, and nurturing (i.e., creating conditions of possibility);
- reflexive, deliberative, informed, and morally committed action (Mahon et al., 2020): they emerge from deep listening and meaningful, reflexive, and dialogic

engagement in/with communities (Freire, 1970); deep listening becomes a way of being/staying informed, and is part of the deliberative process in deciding how best to act;

- responsive action (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015; Mahon et al., 2020): the story tellers (both authors and participants/communities involved) act in ways that are sensitive to context, culture, and circumstances; the stories reflect deep respect for, and valuing of, their partners in the research.

The commitment to critical praxis permeates this volume: it does not rest content with critique, but searches for, envisages, and strives to bring into being transformative possibilities to make the world a better place. As we have seen, the research that led to the preparation of this volume created a space in which diverse voices could be heard and shared, and in which participants' views of worlds worth living in could be nudged towards reality.

Drawing on a long tradition of Vygotskian scholarship, developmental psychologist Stetsenko (2017, 2019) shares similar convictions. She also discusses how this dialectic of the actual and the possible happens through our agency as individuals and as participants in shared cultures, material circumstances, and societies, through human action in history. She rejects the view that our action in the world is isolated and idiosyncratic; it is always fed by, and contributes to, shared cultures, shared material circumstances, and shared social conditions. Despite our occasional feeling that changing the world is beyond us, she assures us that we change the world every time we act. In fact, we can't help doing it. She describes her perspective in terms of a "transformative worldview", of which she says (2019, p. 2):

In the transformative worldview, reality is reconceived as that which is being constantly transformed and realized (literally made real) by people themselves—and, importantly, by people not as isolated, autonomous entities but as agentive actors or active agents of social practices. At the same time, human development is posited to be not only fully immersed in collaborative practices but, more to the point, co-constituted by each individual's active contributions to these practices, whereby the dynamics of what exists is changed as a whole every time a person acts. The emphasis is thus on the nexus of people changing the world and being changed in this very process of them changing the world—as two poles of one and the same, bi-directional, and recursive co-constitution of people and the world in a process of a simultaneous self- and world-realization. This approach implies that people never merely react, nor respond, to what exists but agentively act in co-creating both the world and themselves beyond 'the givenness' of the present. Agency in this account is accorded with a central, formative (or constitutive) role in the processes of human development, the overall sociohistorical dynamics, and the very materiality of the world.

On this transformative view, talking about worlds worth living in is not just wishing; it is giving a living voice to those worlds; it not only anticipates them, but it also conjures them up as forms of life to be inhabited. Doing this has been the driving force behind the project that has produced this volume.

## A Final Word

Since 2006, the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis (PEP) international research network has been investigating the nature of, and the conditions for, education and critical praxis in places including Australia, Colombia, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. In 2019, in Lübeck, Germany, participants in the network agreed to collaborate in the *World Worth Living In* project to listen to, and give voice to, diverse children, young people, and adults in the countries in which we are based. We have been inspired by their views of worlds worth living in, and humbled to recognise that gathering, listening deeply to, and communicating their views has also been a process of communicative action. Habermas (1987) describes communicative action as what we do when we stop to ask, “what are we doing?” and sincerely commit ourselves to (1) intersubjective agreement about the language we use, (2) mutual understanding of one another’s points of view (without necessarily agreeing with others’ perspectives) and (3) striving for unforced consensus about what to do under the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Now we see the fruits of the first phase of the *World Worth Living In* project in this volume, we also recognise that the project has unleashed communicative action on a large scale. People have done it locally, in their own local settings, and they have done it together, communicating across borders with others who also want to discover and realise worlds worth living in.

At the time of writing (November 2021), the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP 26) on Climate Change is drawing to a close. It has not produced national commitments to action sufficient to limit global warming to 1.5° Celsius by the end of the century. Despite the pleas of representatives like those of the low-lying island nations already experiencing the destruction wrought by rising oceans and changing climate, official delegates of the parties (mostly nations) were unable to reach a consensus on action to avert the urgent existential threat to humanity and to the community of life on Earth. Outside the conference, activists, protesters, representatives of non-government organisations, and—especially—young people and students urged the parties to commit to more urgent, ambitious, and effective action. The waves of this vast social movement crashed on the rocks of the established self-interests of industries like the fossil fuel industry, and governments reluctant to jeopardise their existing economic interests. Yet those self-interests *will* crumble. They are crumbling now. Disinvestment from the fossil fuel industry proceeds apace; decarbonisation is under way as the world harnesses renewable energy. The contributors to this volume, and the children, young people, and adults they consulted, are on the side of social movement in this dialectic; they point the way out of the cul-de-sac into which our existing social orders have led us. They have allies in progressive nations and organisations, of course. They are not alone in wanting worlds that are more just and democratic in practice—not just in fine (greenwashing) rhetoric—worlds in which they can live healthy, interesting, and satisfying lives, and worlds in which their views and perspectives are listened to. There could hardly be a clearer message in this book for educators: those who inhabit the future have somehow been disenfranchised in the process of shaping it, including in their own education, and

there are significant ways in which this can be turned around. Deep listening is just the beginning. For showing that, and how, transformation is possible, we owe the authors and those whose voices resound in the chapters, a profound debt of gratitude.

## References

- Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2015). Praxis and the theory of practice architectures: Resources for re-envisioning English education. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 38(3), 150–161.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). Herder & Herder.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *Theory of communicative action, Volume II: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (Thomas McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon.
- Kemmis, S., & Smith, T. J. (2008). Praxis and praxis development. In S. Kemmis & T. J. Smith (Eds.), *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education* (pp. 3–13). Sense.
- Mahon, K., Heikkinen, H. L. T., Huttunen, R., Boyle, T., & Sjølie, E. (2020). What is educational praxis? In K. Mahon, C. Edwards-Groves, S. Francisco, M. Kaukko, S. Kemmis, & K. Petrie (Eds.), *Pedagogy, education, and praxis in critical times* (pp. 15–38). Springer.
- Stetsenko, A. (2017). *The transformative mind: Expanding Vygotsky's approach to development and education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stetsenko, A. (2019). Radical-transformative agency: Continuities and contrasts with relational agency and implications for education. *Frontiers in Education*, 4(148). <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2019.00148>.

**Stephen Kemmis** Stephen Kemmis is Professor Emeritus of Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, and Federation University, Victoria, in Australia. He is interested in education, practice theory, action research, education for sustainable practice, and the development of higher education. Among other works, he is co-author, with Wilfred Carr, of *Becoming Critical: Education, knowledge and action research* (Falmer, 1986); with Robin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon, of *The Action Research Planner: Doing critical participatory action research* (Springer, 2014); and with Jane Wilkinson, Christine Edwards-Groves, Ian Hardy, Peter Grootenbor and Laurette Bristol, of *Changing Practices, Changing Education* (Springer, 2014).

**Kathleen Mahon** is an Associate Professor in Pedagogical Work in the Department of Educational Work at the University of Borås, Sweden, and a Senior Lecturer (Higher Education) in the Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation, University of Queensland. Her research areas are educational praxis, higher education pedagogy, teacher professional learning, and outdoor education. Kathleen is co-editor of the Springer books *Exploring education and professional practice: Through the lens of practice architectures* (2017) and *Pedagogy, education and praxis in critical times* (2020). She is also a Senior Editor of the *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*. Kathleen has a professional background as a secondary school and outdoor education teacher in Australia.



**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

