

06

ACTING WITH YOUTH

Young people are already shaping planetary futures. Education systems must recognize their agency, support their participation, and share power.



KEY MESSAGES

- Young people are already shaping planetary futures through collective action, advocacy, and change.
- Education systems often constrain youth agency through rigid structures and assumptions that position young people as future citizens rather than present civic and political actors.
- Participatory, critical, and action-oriented learning can enable young people to question dominant assumptions, engage diverse ways of knowing, imagine preferred futures, and take meaningful action on issues that affect their lives and futures.
- Youth agency is collective and relational. It is strengthened when young people participate as co-creators and decision-makers in equitable intergenerational partnerships.
- Supporting youth agency requires adults and institutions to share power without transferring responsibility for planetary crises onto young people. Such participation can advance intergenerational justice, democratic renewal, and more inclusive governance.

AUTHORS

Dilraba Anayatova , Arizona State University · Kelly Keena , Underwriters Laboratories Research Institutes · Anna-Lena Neurohr , Learning Planet Institute · Eliana Stromberg , Underwriters Laboratories Research Institutes · Andrea Weinberg , Arizona State University

2026 · Version 1.0

INSIGHT

As the climate crisis unfolds alongside democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism, young people are already navigating changing climate realities and taking action in spaces where adults and institutions have struggled to respond. Yet many education systems continue to position youth as *future* leaders rather than present civic and political actors whose experiences, perspectives, and actions already shape planetary futures. Critical, participatory, and action-oriented approaches interrupt this logic by creating space for young people to question dominant assumptions, bring different ways of knowing into conversation, produce and communicate knowledge, shape public narratives, co-create responses with communities, and act on issues affecting their lives and futures. Youth agency emerges through these relationships and is exercised collectively with other people, communities, places, and the living world. Through meaningful participation and shared decision-making, young people build solidarity, exercise political voice, and contribute to change as it happens. The task for education systems is to recognize and connect with the agency young people already exercise across communities, movements, civic life, and relationships with the living world, while supporting their participation and sharing power with them.

Across contexts, young people are exercising agency in many forms—shaping public agendas, mobilizing collective action, protecting land, water, and living systems, and creating alternative ways of living and relating (Ritchie, 2021; Evans et al., 2025). From global movements such as #FridaysForFuture to Indigenous youth-led movements and local civic initiatives, young people are influencing public discourse and climate governance while also prefiguring different planetary futures (UNICEF, 2021; Karsgaard et al., 2026). Their action unfolds across multiple scales and spaces. Opportunities to participate in global summits and other formal decision-making spaces can enable young people to exercise political voice, influence decisions, and build relationships across contexts (Bindal, n.d.; Buhre & Josefsson, 2025). At the same time, everyday forms of youth-led action—including community organizing, local environmental initiatives, advocacy, and other place-based practices—can cultivate sustained engagement and collective capacity (Skovdal & Benwell, 2021; Trott, 2024; Karsgaard et al., 2026). This agency is not limited to adolescents: younger children also exercise environmental agency through action in their schools and communities (Merritt et al., 2024). Recognizing this wider landscape of youth agency is especially important because many young people are systematically excluded from formal civic and political institutions. Their agency may take forms that conventional understandings of civic participation fail to recognize (Ritchie, 2021; Sambai Usek & Dunlop, 2025). Under authoritarian conditions, youth activism may become less visible as young people navigate repression and political scrutiny (Erfani, 2025). Together, these practices show young people already contributing to the political, social, cultural, and ecological transformations shaping planetary futures.

For education systems, the challenge is to recognize and sustain young people's existing agency while removing the structures that exclude them or restrict their opportunities to act. Education systems can support young people to lead, make decisions, act collectively, and shape the institutions and communities around them by sharing power and providing the necessary time, resources, and institutional support. Yet schools often operate on assumptions about students' readiness to participate meaningfully, reinforced by curricula and pedagogies that privilege knowledge acquisition over

collective problem-solving, experiential learning, and action (Merritt et al., 2021; Merritt et al., 2024; Trott, 2024). These conditions can leave youth participation and collective agency peripheral rather than integral to education (Merritt et al., 2024; Iyengar et al., 2023).

These constraints operate at multiple levels. Epistemically, dominant curricula often prioritize abstract knowledge over lived, relational, and place-based learning. Critical and decolonial approaches can support young people to question these hierarchies, examine the assumptions underlying dominant responses to planetary crises, and engage with diverse ways of knowing and relating to the world. Structurally, rigid curricula, siloed subjects, limited resources, standardized accountability regimes, and individualized and competitive models of learning can restrict participatory, action-oriented education (Bartlett, 2023). Culturally, norms that frame students as needing protection from the emotional weight of climate crises or the complexity of real-world problems, while underestimating their capacity to act, can limit meaningful participation and shared decision-making. Educational cultures that reinforce human separation from the more-than-human world can further constrain the relational forms of agency, care, and responsibility needed to respond to planetary change.

Supporting youth agency is also a matter of rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) affirms children's right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, including their right to be heard in environmental decisions that affect them. Realizing these rights requires education systems and other adult-led institutions to retain responsibility for addressing structural crises while sharing decision-making power, recognizing young people's political agency, and creating conditions for meaningful intergenerational collaboration (Kappelman & Reynoso, 2026). Equitable and sustained intergenerational partnerships can strengthen civic identity, support the exercise of agency, and sustain engagement over time (Rousell et al., 2025; Stollberg et al., 2024), while land-based and relational pedagogies can situate agency within relationships of responsibility and reciprocity with place and other forms of life (Karsgaard, Pillay, & Shultz, 2024). When young people are recognized as contributors with decision-making power rather than included symbolically, they can influence institutional decisions, mobilize peers, strengthen community action, and expand opportunities for participation, particularly in rural and historically marginalized communities.

To support and expand collective agency, schools can make civic and climate action part of everyday learning. Participatory classrooms enable young people to exercise agency through real-world action, reflection, collaboration, and shared decision-making. Participatory approaches—such as Action-Oriented Pedagogies (Weinberg et al., 2024; Weinberg & Jordan, 2023), Green Schools Participatory Budgeting (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2024), and critical and reflective pedagogies informed by Freire (2000) and Palmer (1998)—position students as active participants in imagining and enacting change, even in polarizing contexts. Action-Oriented Pedagogies, in particular, bring together preferred futures, collective orientations, systems thinking, and meaningful action through “real work with real consequences” (Weinberg et al., 2024). Green School Participatory Budgeting extends participation into institutional governance by involving students in decisions about how resources are used (Bartlett & Schugurensky, 2024). Across these approaches, students deliberate collectively, take action, and reflect on its consequences, bringing cognitive, affective, relational, and behavioral dimensions of learning into relationship.

What distinguishes these practices is their shared orientation toward learning as lived, relational, creative, and consequential. Transformation in these contexts can involve creating new possibilities as well as supporting communities to sustain and revitalize ancestral, Indigenous, and other knowledge traditions that dominant education systems have marginalized. Initiatives grounded in young people's environments—including community-based inquiry, local environmental projects, participatory design, youth-produced art and media, climate decision-making through games, and explorations of food systems through cooking and cultural inquiry—enable learners to experience the effects of collective actions and understand themselves as participants in wider social and ecological relationships (Merritt et al., 2021; Attala, 2017). When young people create knowledge and cultural materials addressed to educators, policymakers, and wider publics, they can reshape conventional educational relationships: youth become educators and contributors to public understanding rather than merely recipients of adult knowledge. Learning becomes a practice of acting, creating, and communicating with others—human and more-than-human—through relationships of reciprocity, care, and shared responsibility. In these contexts, youth agency is exercised and strengthened through participatory, place-based, and creative practices that make education for planetary futures tangible, hopeful, and shared.

When young people participate as contributors and decision-makers rather than symbolic representatives, their knowledge, values, and creativity can reshape schools and communities. Through consequential action—co-creating responses, collaborating with communities, influencing decisions, and challenging structures that constrain their participation—they exercise and strengthen capacities for collective action and democratic engagement (Enverga, 2025; Iyengar et al., 2023). Critical pedagogies further support this exercise of agency by enabling young people to examine how power operates, question whose knowledge and interests shape existing systems, and imagine and enact alternatives (Freire, 2000). Sustaining such participation requires institutional structures that recognize diverse forms of youth agency and embed shared decision-making across curriculum, governance, and everyday educational life. Education can thereby become one setting through which young people's existing agency contributes to social and systemic transformation.

The challenge is no longer whether young people are ready to participate. It is whether education systems are prepared to recognize and support their agency, share power, and create conditions for meaningful participation. Doing so requires aligning curriculum standards, teacher preparation, school improvement plans, and accountability frameworks so that youth participation and shared decision-making become integral to how learning is organized. Whole-school approaches and cross-school networks further expand reach and amplify impact (Hargis et al., 2021). When young people are recognized as present political and civic actors, supported in exercising collective agency, and included in decisions that shape their lives and futures, participation becomes part of how education itself is governed and transformed.

06 Pathways for transformation

Advancing youth agency means recognizing young people as present civic and political actors and creating conditions for their knowledge, participation, and collective agency to shape education and society.

01 Institutionalize shared decision-making with young people. Embed meaningful youth participation across curriculum, governance, budgeting, accountability, and policy, moving beyond consultation and symbolic representation to shared authority.

02 Remove structural and cultural barriers to participation. Address rigid curricula, standardized accountability, inaccessible processes, unequal resources, and assumptions about young people's readiness that determine whose agency is recognized and supported.

03 Cultivate critical consciousness. Create opportunities for young people to examine how power operates, question dominant assumptions and knowledge hierarchies, and imagine and act toward alternative futures.

04 Design action-oriented learning with young people. Co-create learning environments in which students investigate consequential issues, imagine preferred futures, deliberate collectively, undertake meaningful action, and reflect on its consequences through approaches such as Action-Oriented Pedagogies and Green School Participatory Budgeting.

05 Build intergenerational partnerships. Create sustained opportunities to learn across generations, share power and responsibility, and act together on planetary challenges.

06 Ground agency in place, community, and the living world. Connect learning with lands, waters, ecosystems, cultural knowledge, and lived realities, cultivating reciprocity and responsibility across human and more-than-human relationships.

- 07 Sustain participation through institutional support.** Invest in educators, accessible participatory structures, community partnerships, networks, time, and resources so that youth agency becomes an enduring feature of education rather than a short-term project.

ILLUSTRATIVE PATHWAYS IN PRACTICE

The following examples show how youth agency is exercised through knowledge production and public pedagogy, shared governance, and intergenerational organizing. Although different in scale and setting, each moves beyond symbolic participation by positioning young people as contributors and decision-makers whose knowledge, creativity, and collective action help shape institutions, communities, and planetary futures.

From Classroom to Climate Governance: Youth as Knowledge Producers

An international climate education project called Learning Collective Worldmaking: Youth Activism for Climate Futures brought together 145 young people from 11 intensely fossil fuel-reliant countries to investigate climate change within and across their various contexts, lands and waters, knowledge systems, and subject areas. Developed by Carrie Karsgaard, Lynette Shultz, and Sheena Wilson, the project recognizes young people's co-agency with the land, all living beings, and one another, supporting co-creation of policy over time. The culminating policy paper, *The Earth Is Speaking: A Call for Climate Justice from the Next Generation*, which has been translated and shared with policymakers in the young people's home contexts, argues that climate change is "fundamentally a crisis of listening: our failure to hear the earth, each other, and the communities most vulnerable to climate breakdown. We call for climate justice rooted in connection, accountability, and education, a future built not above nature, but with it." The initiative created opportunities for youth to articulate their experiences, deliberate across differences, and bring their perspectives into spaces where climate futures are being shaped.

A complementary initiative, *Turn It Around! Youth Visions of Education Futures*, invites young artists and writers around the world to create learning materials for educators, policymakers, and political leaders. By reversing the conventional direction of teaching, it positions young people as public educators whose creative work can shape conversations about education, ecological justice, and planetary futures. Together, the two initiatives demonstrate how youth agency can move from creative expression and collaborative inquiry into public learning and policy dialogue.

Learn more

Learning Collective Worldmaking: Youth Activism for Climate Futures. (n.d.) <https://collective-worldmaking.ca/project1.html>

Artists' Literacies Institute and Arizona State University. (n.d.). *Turn it around! Youth visions of education futures*. <https://turnitaroundcards.org/>

For a similar project, see Karsgaard, C., & Davidson, D. (2023). Must we wait for youth to speak out before we listen? International youth perspectives and climate change education. *Educational Review*, 75(1), 74–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1905611>

Green School Participatory Budgeting: Learning to Govern for Planetary Wellbeing

Green School Participatory Budgeting transforms decisions about designated school funds into opportunities for democratic learning, shared governance, and ecological action. Rather than reserving financial decisions for adults alone, it enables students, educators, and other members of the school community to deliberate, decide, and steward shared resources together. Students identify challenges, develop proposals, deliberate over priorities, and collectively determine how funds should be invested in projects that advance sustainability and community wellbeing—from school gardens and biodiversity initiatives to energy conservation and climate resilience. By linking consequential decision-making with environmental action, Green School Participatory Budgeting turns governance into a living curriculum through which learners practise democratic participation while helping align institutional priorities with ecological responsibility. Its democratic promise depends on inclusive design that enables students who are often excluded from school governance to participate meaningfully. The approach demonstrates how education can support young people in co-creating more just, democratic, and regenerative futures.

Learn more

Schugurensky, D., & Bartlett, T. (Eds.). (2024). *Educating for democracy: The case for participatory budgeting in schools*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035302178>

Bartlett, T., & Schugurensky, D. (2024). Doing democracy to green your school community [Video and presentation]. RCE Greater Phoenix and Arizona State University. <https://www.peoplepowered.org/resources-content/doing-democracy-green-schools-pb>

Youth, Intergenerational Organizing, and the Rights of Nature in Ecuador

Ecuador's 2008 Constitution established an important legal foundation by becoming the first national constitution to recognize Nature as a subject of rights. Against this legal and political background, young people have participated alongside Indigenous movements, environmental organizations, and other social actors in challenging extractive development and defending Yasuní National Park. After the government announced plans in 2013 to permit oil extraction in Block 43, young people became prominent participants in Yasunidos, a broad coalition seeking a national referendum. The coalition submitted approximately 750,000 signatures, although electoral authorities initially rejected its petition. Following almost a decade of organizing, advocacy, and legal struggle, a national referendum was held in 2023, and Ecuadorians voted to end oil extraction in Block 43. The campaign demonstrates that youth-led action need not mean young people acting alone. Yasunidos drew strength from longer Indigenous struggles to defend territory and the Rights of Nature while creating space for another

generation to carry that work forward. Education can support this form of agency by connecting learners with communities and movements, supporting their collective organizing, and enabling them to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their territories and futures.

Learn more

Barzallo, G. (2023, July 31). Biodiversity on the ballot in Ecuador. *YES! Magazine*.
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2023/07/31/ecuador-voting-oil-drilling>

Human Rights Watch. (2015, August 27). *Environmentalists under siege in Ecuador*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/27/environmentalists-under-siege-ecuador>

Rainforest Foundation US. (2023, August 28). *Yes to Yasuní: Democracy survives latest threat in Ecuador*. <https://rainforestfoundation.org/yes-to-yasuni/>

REFERENCES

Attala, L. (2017). The 'edibility approach': Using edibility to explore relationships, plant agency and the porosity of species' boundaries. *Advances in Anthropology*, 7(3), 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aa.2017.73009>

Bindal, V. (n.d.). *The not-so-straight path towards sustainability: A circular economy*. Mission 4.7.
<https://www.mission4point7.org/news/the-not-so-straight-path-towards-sustainability>

Bartlett, T. L. (2023). *Participatory processes to address wicked problems in K12 schools: A case of reimagining school safety* [Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University]. ProQuest LLC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED640991>

Bartlett, T., & Schugurensky, D. (2024). Inclusive civic education and school democracy through participatory budgeting. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 19(3), 362–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979231160701>

Buhre, F., & Josefsson, J. (2025). The materiality of youth representation at climate summits: Navigating barriers, routes, and spaces. *Globalizations*, 22(3), 426–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2404285>

Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2023). *General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change* (CRC/C/GC/26). United Nations. <https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/GC/26>

Enverga, I. (2025). *Empowering schools to foster active participation and leadership*. UNESCO.

Erfani, R. (2025). Climate activism in our part of the world and methodological insights on how to study it. *Youth*, 5(3), Article 80. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth5030080>

Evans, R. S., McGregor, H. E., & Reed, B. (2025). Pedagogical principles for encouraging (socially just) youth climate action: A schema for citizenship education curriculum analysis. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 20(3), 450–468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979241289280>

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Hargis, K., McKenzie, M., & LeVert-Chiasson, I. (2021). A whole institution approach to climate change education: Preparing school systems to be climate proactive. In R. Iyengar & C. Kwauk (Eds.), *Curriculum and learning for climate action: Toward an SDG 4.7 roadmap for systems change* (pp. 43–66). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789000447181_004

Iyengar, R., Song, S., Sridhar, D., Purcell, W. M., Nielsen, A., Silova, I., Witenstein, M. A., & Tung, W.-W. (2023). Re-thinking education for sustainable development: Key learning insights from the SDSN USA Transformative Education Summit 2023. *Journal of Contemplative and Holistic Education*, 1(1), Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.25035/jche.01.01.09>

Kappelman, K., & Reynoso, S. (2026, January 5). Reimagining leadership: Advancing youth-adult equity & partnership. *AEA365*. <https://aea365.org/blog/reimagining-leadership-advancing-youth-adult-equity-partnership-by-kristin-kappelman-and-samantha-reynoso/>

Karsgaard, C., Pillay, T., & Shultz, L. (2024). Facing colonial Canada through pedagogies of equity for First Nations: An advocacy education project. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 27(4), 443–466.

Karsgaard, C., Silova, I., & Desimoni, V. (Eds.). (2025–2026). Politics of disruption: Youth climate activism and education [Special issue]. *Youth*. https://www.mdpi.com/journal/youth/special_issues/GVZ5J3EVE3

Merritt, E. G., Harkins, T., & Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. (2021, Winter). Empowering elementary students through environmental service-learning. *CLEARING: The Journal of Community-Based Environmental Literacy Education*, 8–11. <https://clearingmagazine.org/archives/20432>

Merritt, E. G., Weinberg, A. E., Lapan, C., & Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. (2024). Igniting kid power: The impact of environmental service-learning on elementary students' awareness of energy problems and solutions. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 116, Article 103670. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103670>

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. Jossey-Bass.

Ritchie, J. (2021). Movement from the margins to global recognition: Climate change activism by young people and in particular Indigenous youth. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 30(1–2), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1854830>

Rousell, D., Ball, F., Ball, R., Byrne, K., Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A., Foster, J., Gough, A., Lucena, S., Maiava, N., & Mayes, E. (2025). Activating the climate child imaginary: Intergenerational collaboration as a long-term strategy for climate justice education. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 41(4), 824–842. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2025.19>

Sambai Usek, V., & Dunlop, L. (2025). Indigenous youth activism: The role of education in creating capabilities. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 28(2), 281–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2261865>

Skovdal, M., & Benwell, M. C. (2021). Young people's everyday climate crisis activism: New terrains for research, analysis and action. *Children's Geographies*, 19(3), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1924360>

Stollberg, J., Bogdan, D., & Jonas, E. (2024). Empowering the younger generation increases their willingness for intergenerational reconciliation in the context of climate change. *Scientific Reports*, 14, Article 17825. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-68145-9>

Trott, C. D. (2024). Activism as education in and through the youth climate justice movement. *British Educational Research Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4082>

UNICEF. (2021). *Prospects for children in 2021*. UNICEF,

Weinberg, A., & Jordan, M. (2023). *Action-oriented pedagogies: A framework for K-12 sustainability education*. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.23833974>

Weinberg, A. E., Jordan, M. E., & Jongewaard, R. (2024). “Real Work, Real Consequences”: An action-oriented pedagogies (AOP) framework for sustainability education in K-12 classrooms. *Sustainability Science*, 19(6), 2027–2040. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-024-01560-z>

Publication details

Suggested citation: Anayatova, D., Keena, K., Neurohr, A.-L., Stromberg, E., & Weinberg, A. (2026). Young people are already shaping planetary futures. Education systems must recognize their agency, support their participation, and share power. In I. Silova, G. Fischman, V. Desimoni, S. Hartman, A. Weinberg, D. Anayatova, S. F. Beardmore, R. Iyengar, C. Karsgaard, K. Keena, H. Komatsu, C. Kwauk, G. M. L. Mendes, T. McCowan, D. L. Morrison, A.-L. Neurohr, & J. Rappleye (Eds.), *Key insights on education for planetary futures*. Education for Planetary Futures Collaborative, Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory, UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES.

Authors:

Dilraba Anayatova, Arizona State University · <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4714-6715>

Kelly Keena, Underwriters Laboratories Research Institutes · <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6085-390X>

Anna-Lena Neurohr, Learning Planet Institute · <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4706-6763>

Eliana Stromberg, Underwriters Laboratories Research Institutes · <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0547-3893>

Andrea Weinberg, Arizona State University · <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4327-6237>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14507/lfc-epf-keyinsights.06>

Online: [View this Key Insight online](#)

Contact: info@planetaryfutures.education

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>
