Foreword

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'How about I send Izzy a WhatsApp?' 2 ¾-year-old Charlie asks when talking with his mother about how much he misses his 2 ½-year-old friend who has recently moved away for 6 months. With his mother's iPhone and technical support, Charlie then dresses up as a pirate and proceeds to produce a short, playful WhatsApp video where he is 'Charliebeard' and his distant friend is 'Izzypirate'. Although only 15-seconds long, the message is dynamic, playful, creative and affectionate. As it travels through the ether to his friend, it crosses the boundaries of time and place, of distance and separation. As it is watched and rewatched by Izzie and her family, and by Charlie and his family, it reinforces the young children's friendship. It becomes the first of many in a series of playful WhatsApp video exchanges between Charlie and Izzy that helps to maintain their friendship whilst they are apart.

This short vignette describes one instance of 0-3 year-old children's web-mediated activity that we encountered as part of a Europe-wide study of young children's digital literacy practices (Gillen, 2018). How do we, as researchers, find out about and make sense of such instances where young children are playing, exploring, learning and maintaining close links with friends and family with and through digital technology? How do we, as educators, respond to the new opportunities for innovation, inspiration and creativity that digitally-mediated communication has made possible between all generations around the world?

We know that not all children growing up in the current era are as fortunate as Charlie, who was born into a white middle-class family living in a quiet rural location in southern England. As Dyson argues in this volume, geopolitical, socioeconomic and gendered factors influence children's access to the technologies with which they might play, compose, design and learn. For example, in the comparatively affluent United Kingdom, twenty percent of children live in damp and inadequately heated houses, ten percent do not have warm coats for the winter, five percent are malnourished and hungry (Urban, 2016), and we know that economically disadvantaged children tend to be less skilled with digital media than their more affluent peers (Sefton-Green et al, 2016). For these children, school may the only means to learn how to use digital technology and to build a secure future in the digital economy. For millions of children living in more troubled lands, whose lives are disrupted by war, displacement, famine and disease, there are more pressing needs than access to new technology, and yet for these children and their parents a single mobile phone can offer a lifeline to bind separated families together, or to access essential medical advice and aid (ITU, 2013; Lee, 2015; World Bank, 2016). Childhoods vary, often 'in heartbreaking ways' (Dyson, this volume).

If our collective aim is to find out about children's experiences of growing up – wherever their childhoods are experienced – and to improve the quality of all children's lives and learning, then how can we overcome the countless problematic issues that we encounter in the process of our investigations? There are gaps and inconsistencies in what is known, wide divergences in research approaches, and oftentimes there are tensions between different disciplinary norms and conventions. In this timely Handbook, the contributors address these and many other issues that characterise contemporary research by starting a conversation that reaches across disciplinary boundaries. Focussing on children aged 2 to 8 years, the chapters in this edition report on recent research conducted by a selection of established and early

career academics who are developing innovatory approaches to researching and theorising how young children play and learn with new technology, and how the influences of digital media filter through into children's play and learning with conventional communication and literacy technologies. Whilst some contributors focus on the affordances and constraints of new digital devices as data collection and analysis tools, others problematize the usefulness and suitability of established research paradigms in the quest to understand how young children learn in social worlds that are increasingly mediated through digital channels, and where interpersonal relationships are often negotiated through assemblages of physically co-present and distant networks. The individual arguments put forward are not necessarily ground-breaking, yet they push forward debates about what St.Pierre (2014, p3) refers to as 'the impossibility of an intersection between conventional humanist qualitative methodology and "the posts"', that is, postconstuctionist, poststructural, posthuman and post-qualitative enquiry. Together, they constitute a groundswell of new perspectives that at best lead to a fundamental re-thinking of the inextricably interwoven relationships between epistemology, ontology and methodology, and at the very least unsettle minds that may be set in a groove, opening up new possibilities and new horizons in the field of education research.

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