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Learning in and beyond schoolCadhla O'Sullivan¹ *Sharon Bessell¹

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This article is co-authored by children and adults, with children taking the lead based on their deep knowledge and daily experience of learning. School is important to learning, and is a place to learn how to read, write and do maths. It is also a place to learn to get along with others. School helps people get a job. There are also lots of things that children need to learn outside of school, including how to look after ourselves. Children need to learn from people who take care to have positive interactions with children and to treat us with respect. Children also learn from each other, and friendships and kindness are important. Children need adults to teach us in ways that are fun, make sure we are safe, and support us to learn and achieve our dreams.

Keywords:

Australia, child authors, community, learning, school, teachers.

Introduction

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Education Council, 2019: p. 2) sets out the vision for Australia's education system. It aims to create 'a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no

matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face'. The Declaration has two goals, which are described as distinct but interrelated:

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- Confident and creative individuals
- Successful lifelong learners
- Active and informed members of the community.

Learning is seen as occurring through partnerships ‘with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life’ (Education Council, 2019: p. 3). In common with many education policies, strategies and declarations (e.g. *Australian Education Act 2013* (Australian Government, 2024); Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034 (Department of Education, 2024a); Engaged classrooms: Supporting all students to achieve (Department of Education, 2024b); National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education (Department of Education, 2022)), the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration positions learning primarily within educational institutions, but it also recognises the role of community, of social connections and positive relationships in education. This raises questions of what children need to learn in school and beyond to be confident and creative lifelong learners? What kinds of learning support children to be active and informed members of the community, not only in the future but now. What do children want to learn, and what is needed for learning to be fun and engaging? To fully answer these questions, we need to ask children.

This article is co-authored by two adult academics and four primary school children. It is based on the young co-authors’ deep knowledge and daily experience of learning. In writing, we acknowledge the centrality of the education system to children’s learning but also explore how learning can continue beyond the classroom and into the community. We consider how learning could be enhanced and made more meaningful if the idea of partnerships across the community to nurture a love of learning is made real. In considering these issues, this article offers a unique perspective: that of children.

Rarely are children genuinely consulted on the questions that shape this article (Graham et al, 2018). Policy frameworks, including the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, are discussed, debated and designed by adult professionals, with very little influence from children. When consultation with students occurs, it is likely to be with young adults or secondary-school-aged students rather than those of primary school age. Indeed, despite Australia having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 35 years ago, and thus committing to children’s right to express their views on matters affecting them, children have had very little influence over the nature of curricula or modes of teaching. In saying this, we recognise that both curriculum design and teaching require a very high level of expertise and knowledge. However, including children’s knowledge as learners would strengthen the experience of learning and likely have a positive impact on outcomes. The implementation of adult-designed policies in schools is generally led by principals and teachers, sometimes with input from parent groups. In very few cases do children have meaningful input into decision making at the school level, despite evidence to suggest that when this occurs, children’s sense of wellbeing is enhanced (Graham et al, 2022).

Children also have little opportunity to shape learning experiences in the community. Yet, if the visions of life-long learning, creativity and active community membership are to be achieved, what and

how children learn – and teach others – within their communities matters. Achieving such a vision must involve children in decisions about what is learned beyond school, and how.

This article is written collaboratively by two academics and four primary-school-aged children, who are students at Mooroopna Park Primary School in Victoria. The children have chosen writing names, rather than use their real names. Importantly, this article has been collaboratively written and the children are co-authors not research participants. However, to ensure the ethics of the process, the approach adopted was considered and approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee: Protocol 2021/458 (amendment 2025).

While this introduction is written by the adult authors, the body of the article is written by the child authors. It is the result of our exploration and brainstorming of what children need to learn, where they can learn and how positive relationships – within school and beyond – can foster learning.

As this article is based on respectful collaboration, principles of ensuring children were safe and supported within the process, able to share their views freely and engage on their own terms, were essential. While this article is not part of a research project, the authors initially met through research and decided to move to a writing collaboration on the important subject of learning (which was not the focus of the research). The approach taken was one of collaborative writing. However, the adult authors were aware of the need to ensure principles of safety and ethical engagement. Thus, the principles of child centredness and respect for human rights that guide our approach to research also guided this collaboration (Bessell & O’Sullivan, 2024). To ensure the collaboration met these principles, approval for the approach to collaboration was sought and provided by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. Notably, the same rights-based principles have guided our collaborations with adult partners and stakeholders (Bessell, 2024).

The process of writing *with* children and seeking to have our co-authored paper published has demonstrated that many adults find it hard to believe that children and adults can collaborate, with children taking the lead. We have encountered a dominant view that adults must have provided prompts to encourage or direct children, or that collaboration cannot take place outside a formal research project. In this case, the children and adults first met as part of a research project, but this article is independent of that project. In this article, the children led conversations and decided what should be in the article. The ideas in this article are not the product of an adult-led project, but are the ideas children decided to include in a child-led writing collaboration based on their own deep knowledge and daily experience of learning. The ideas that the children put forward in this article are important for adults to reflect on and incorporate when designing learning programs, both within school and beyond. The adult co-authors on this article hope that it will demonstrate the power of intergenerational collaboration.

This article is one of two articles, authored collaboratively by adults and children, that focus on learning and education and were written completely independently from each other (the other article is Bessell et al. (2025)). It is notable that common themes emerge powerfully, signalling a level of consensus among children that is important for adults to hear and reflect on.

All sections of this article, whether written by adults or by children, are based on our own ideas. The adult authors drew on the relevant literature to help inform their ideas. The child authors drew on their experience and expertise as children experiencing education and learning daily. The young authors did not undertake research with other children as part of this article. The sections that follow are led by the young authors of this paper, with the adults listening, facilitating and supporting.

Learning at school

School is important for learning about maths, reading, writing and spelling. These are skills that help in getting a job. Jobs are important and are needed if people are able to survive. Without a job you can't really do anything: you can't get money, buy food and drinks, or do the things you need or want to do.

There are also other things that schools should teach. Children need to learn about the world, how it works and how to manage within it. It is important to learn about the value of money, how to earn, how to save and how to pay bills. Children hear a lot about the tax system, but don't learn what tax is, how it works and how it is important. Real world things like how to manage money and how tax works could be taught by schools and could be part of learning maths, reading and writing. School should also teach children about politics and voting, and how to have a say in the world.

School is also important in teaching children how to get along with others. By being at school, children learn about friendships and learn how to bond. If children don't go to school, it is hard to learn these things.

We also think it is important that children learn about voting and politics and, importantly, having your own say in the world because the politics affect everything that's going on. We think that this is something that children should learn in school but most of the time it should be learned outside of school, at home with your parents and guardians and through the news.

So school is important, and children learn a lot from teachers, but there are other places where children can learn and other people who can help.

Learning outside of school

We have already said that getting a job is important, but not just any job. Children need help in thinking about the kind of job they would like because, to be happy, it is important to have a job you like. Children need help from adults in deciding what job is right for them, and it would be good to be able to talk to someone who is not a teacher and who knows how things work when children don't understand them.

Children also need to learn to relax and take care of ourselves. A lot happens in children's lives – often more than adults think. There is a lot of pressure. Sometimes things become overwhelming. Sometimes school feels overwhelming. Sometimes it feels like we have to push ourselves and our bodies too far. Children need to be able to wind down and have time at home to put ourselves back together.

Children need to learn what is good for us and for our bodies. We need to learn how to cook nutritious food, so our bodies are energised. We need to learn how to care for ourselves and how to be healthy so we can glow (not just grow). These are things we can learn at home, from parents and guardians, from the news and from other adults who care and support us.

Children also need to have fun, and this often means learning new things, like how to swim or ride a bike. Instructors can help children learn things like swimming or bike riding, but it is also good to learn at home, in backyards, in parks and in playgrounds. All children need people and places in our community that feel safe to help us learn these things.

Some children learn through sport, and coaches can be people that children can turn to and ask questions of. But not every child wants to play sport, some children prefer art or reading – and it is important to have people to do these things with and to learn from. Not everything can be learned in a classroom, sometimes it is important to watch how something is done (like swimming) and to share ideas (like cooking). This means that it is important for children to have different people to learn from.

Who we learn from

Teachers are important in children's lives. They teach us the things we need to learn in school, like maths, English and science. But for the things we need to learn outside of school, we need to learn from wise people who have experience. Children can learn a lot from the seniors in our communities, like grandparents. For example, seniors and elders can teach us a lot about different kinds of jobs and how to get a job, because they have been working most of their lives.

Parents and guardians teach us a lot, but they don't always have enough time. It would be good if all parents had time to spend with their children to care for them and to teach them everything we need to learn. But children also need other adults in our lives that we feel safe to talk to and can learn from. Some children have support workers or therapists that help them, but it is also good to have connections in the community. Some children don't have too many adults in their lives, or don't have adults they can trust or rely on.

Adults are important in teaching children. But we can only learn from people when we have more positive than negative interactions with them. Children need to know the people around them and trust them to be able to learn from them. Sometimes adults do not treat children with respect. Adults need to be honest and caring, they need to listen to children. When adults are helping children to learn something new, they should listen first and then suggest a few ways of doing things. Some adults say things can only be done one way, with no options or choices and this can be controlling. We need to be safe, but sometimes we need to learn by mistakes. Children also need to learn from good role models, who don't get in trouble and that don't do bad stuff. Children need to see and learn from positive behaviours. Children need people who give good advice, who are respectful and helpful, welcoming, kind and persistent. Children need someone who is always there. That is when we can learn best. That is when we can be safe to make choices ourselves and sometimes make mistakes.

Children also learn from each other. Friendships and kindness are really important for children to learn.

Some concluding comments from the adult authors

The sections about learning in school and out of school and about the importance of relationships highlight powerfully how Australia can achieve goal 2 of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration: that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community. To achieve this goal, an excellent education system is essential, but so too is creating child-inclusive communities (Bessell & Vuckovic, 2023) and intergenerational relationships that foster experiential learning, skills development and knowledge building in all forms – and in forms that matter to children (Bessell, 2017; Mannion, 2018). Developing an education system that promotes excellence and equity is an essential goal. So

too is creating communities within which children are connected, welcomed, cared for and able to learn (Bessell et al., 2024; Skouteris et al., 2025). We are currently a long way from ensuring all children grow up in such communities (Lang et al., 2024), but it is a goal we must strive for.

A final word from the child authors

There are a lot of things we need to learn that will make our lives good now and help us have happy, successful futures. We need great schools and great teachers. We also need opportunities to connect with our communities, to be part of things, and to get to know – and to learn from – the adults around us. We need adults to make learning fun, so we will love it. We need adults who care, who make sure we are safe, and support us to learn and achieve our dreams for the future. Our challenge to adults is to make the changes needed for all children to learn not just in school but everywhere.

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