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Learning for a healthy life now and in the future

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Abstract

This article is co-authored by children and adults, and discusses the things about education, learning and having a healthy life that are important to children. School matters now and is important for getting a job and living as an adult. Learning happens in school and also in the community. Children need to learn in ways that are respectful and inclusive. There is no one right way to learn, and children often learn in different ways. Learning is best when it is fun – but sometimes it is very rewarding to learn things that are hard. There are some important things that some children do not learn anywhere, like being able to cope with stress. A key message of this article is that it can be hard to do things alone but with care and support, it is a bit easier for kids. With support, children can reach their dreams.

Keywords:

Australia, child authors, community, education, learning, school, teaching, wellbeing.

Introduction

This article was written by Ahmed (12 years), Aaliyah (11 years), Jonathan (12 years), Lilyjana (10 years) and Tru (9 years), along with Cadhla (adult) and Sharon (adult). Children's last names have not been used to protect confidentiality due to their age;

consequently, first authorship is given to the academic authors in alphabetical order, but all authors have fully contributed to the development and writing of the article. This article is different from most you will read in academic journals because it is written by children and that's why it is important.

This context section is written by Cadhla and Sharon, who are academics. The main sections of the paper are written by Ahmed, Aaliyah, Jonathan, Lilyjana and Tru. This article is a genuine, intergenerational collaboration. We jointly workshopped ideas, with the young authors leading the process, and then collaboratively refined the article; finally, all authors agreed on the final version. This article has been collaboratively written and the children are co-authors rather than 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). The ideas here are the authors own. The adult authors have drawn on the relevant literature while the child authors have drawn on their own deep knowledge and expertise of learning and their reflections on the connections between learning and being healthy. This article is not based on empirical research. Neither the adult authors nor child authors undertook primary research with children as part of writing this article.

This article is not part of a research project, but a writing collaboration with children. Nevertheless, the adult authors drew on the principles that shape their research with children to ensure that the writing process was child centred. The rights-based principles that shape the adult authors' research methodology also shaped the nature of the collaboration; these principles prioritise the best interests of the child, uphold children's right to receive and impart information in age appropriate ways, and protect children from any form of harm or exploitation (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024).

This is one of two articles that positions children as experts by experience and aim to bring their knowledge, priorities and ideas for change to debates about the nature of education and learning in Australia (the other article is O'Sullivan et al. (2025)). While the articles were written entirely separately, common themes emerge in both articles, highlighting a level consensus among children on what matters about learning. Each of these articles highlights the deep expertise children have on issues that impact on their lives daily. The failure to listen to children is a failure on the part of adults; as the sections of this article that are authored by children demonstrate, it is not a failure of children to articulate their ideas articulately and powerfully. When adults who have responsibility for policies and services that shape children's lives fail to consider children's knowledge and expertise, opportunities for genuine inclusion are missed and outcomes are likely less than they could (and should) have been. Yet, too often, adults talk the language of child participation but fail to follow up with meaningful action. Too often, child participation becomes youth participation and young people in their teens or early twenties are providing opportunities to take part in discussion and decision making. It is rare for children in middle childhood or primary school to have such opportunities – and, as this article demonstrates, we are less as a society as a result.

Context: Connection health, wellbeing and learning

This context section was written by the academics who are co-authors (Sharon and Cadhla) and approved by the child authors.

There is increasing recognition that children's learning, health and wellbeing are closely related and cannot be advanced within narrow silos (Cooke et al., 2010; Eide & Showalter, 2011; Littleton

& Reader, 2022; Slemp et al., 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Australia in 1990, entitles children to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24) and quality education (Articles 28 and 29; United Nations, 1989). Hahn and Truman (2015: p. 658) argued that education is 'both a critical component of a person's health and a contributing cause of other elements of the person's concurrent and future health'. Education is a powerful determinant of health, including life expectancy and health behaviours (Groot & Maassen van den Brink, 2007; The Lancet Public Health, 2020). High quality education for all has the potential to reduce health disparities and improve overall health outcomes (Telfair & Shelton, 2012). Education also provides pathways to future employment while reducing socioeconomic and political inequalities (The Lancet Public Health, 2020).

In seeking to achieve good health for all children, today and into adulthood, education is essential and one of the most significant investments in individual and public health. In the 21st century, schools remain a key site for education, even though learning occurs through many avenues. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration outlines a vision for a world class education system that contributes to every aspect of children and young people's wellbeing. The second goal of the Declaration is that 'all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community' (Education Council, 2019: p. 1). The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement aims to ensure that 'governments and school systems, in partnership with families ... support every student to succeed ...' (Department of Education, 2025: p. 3). These expanded visions of education present challenges. While literacy and numeracy skills remain foundational to children's education (Jackson et al., 2023), learning is expected to deliver far more. As a result, new ways of thinking about education within schools and learning beyond them are needed. There is much work to be done to ensure that education in Australia is of the highest quality for all students, is equitable, provides children with the learning outcomes expected in the 21st century, and fulfills the promise of contributing to positive health outcomes and wellbeing.

Much has been written on what needs to change, most often from the perspective of adult experts. This article takes a different approach and brings to the debate the perspectives of children and young people who experience school daily. The article has been co-written by two academics (Sharon and Cadhla) who facilitated a series of workshops with children, with the direction of the discussion led by the children. As noted, Sharon and Cadhla wrote this context section. At the workshops, children brainstormed the issues that they wished to include in this article, and then collaboratively determined the content. The following sections are written by Ahmed, Aaliyah, Jonathan, Lilyjana and Tru; Elijah (aged 7 years) contributed ideas during the first workshop.

The development and writing of this article builds on the rights-based, child-centred approach adopted by the Children's Policy Centre at the Australian National University (Bessell, 2017, 2024; Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024). The young co-authors of this article are not participants in research but lead partners in identifying what is needed if education is to fulfil its promise of delivering not only learning outcomes but also health and wellbeing, and opening children and young people's future pathways. This article presents the lived experience expertise of students in primary school and

early high school that is often missing from debates around education and learning. The ideas are those of the young authors; they are powerful and fully endorsed by the adult co-authors. The following sections are written by the young authors.

Children's experience of learning

Learning is important. Everyone learns something, every day, and everywhere. What we learn is important but so is how we learn. Learning needs to be fun and active. We need to have choices about how we learn. We need to be able to learn about our passions and all kids need to have opportunities and be able to follow their dreams.

In this article, we write about what children need to learn, both in school and at home, and about the things that are important that we don't get to learn about. And we write about how children need to learn.

What we learn in school

In school, we learn things like maths, English, physical education, history and writing. These things are important, but sometimes they get boring and we will say more about how to make learning interesting later.

We also need to learn how to prepare for the future and to know about things like AI. We need to be ready for what's coming next and to know about the jobs of the future, because they are the jobs we will do.

Some subjects are important because they help students to learn the things they need for the future. Maths is important for a lot of reasons – like counting money and budgeting. It is also very important for children who want a career that needs maths, like engineering. But it's good if children have choices, those who want to be engineers or have jobs that need maths, might want to learn a lot more about maths. Other children might not want to learn so much maths.

Sometimes children might not like a subject, but they can learn about it in other ways. For example, some children dislike writing – but writing is in everything, and you don't need to have to write lines to learn, you can learn writing through English, maths, history or lots of other things. Sometimes, children learn to like subjects that they used to dislike. Learning new things can be hard and it doesn't always have to be fun, it can be challenging. Sometimes children learn a lot from making mistakes.

English is also important. It is good to learn proper English and to be able to communicate clearly and not just speak in slang. It is important to know how to speak English well and to be able to communicate clearly. If you know a lot about English, you can teach others who don't speak it, or don't speak much. Learning other languages is also good, and it can be fun. If somebody is new to Australia, it would be good if other people know that language and can help them. Learning other languages helps if you are travelling in other countries.

It would be good if more Aboriginal languages were taught in schools, because we are on Aboriginal land. This land belongs to Aboriginal people and it is respectful to learn the language of the land. If we did, we would be able to communicate with Aboriginal people in their own language. If schools teach about Aboriginal culture, teachers need to understand it and be respectful. If culture

is talked about in a mean way, Aboriginal children will feel like they are being picked on, and that should never happen. Aboriginal culture belongs to Aboriginal children and they need to be part of talking and teaching about it.

Some schools have other subjects that are important. One school has a subject called 'how the world works', which is about people who made the world a better place. Sometimes it's learning about the past, and sometimes it's about people now who are doing inspiring things that we can learn from and be inspired by.

There are some things that children should learn more about at school. Learning how to budget and save money is very important. Maths might help with this. Children need to learn more how to do the right thing with money and not do the wrong thing. It's important to learn how to spend on the things that are really needed, and only then go and buy the things that are nice to have but not needed. Learning how to save money is important, and so is counting money so you know how much you have. Learning those things is important now, and is also very important for the future because you might have a strict budget. If you have a strict budget, you won't be able to buy stuff freely and it's really hard to buy stuff that you need. You have to learn how to decide what to spend on.

Learning outside of school

School doesn't teach you everything you need to learn. Some things are learned outside school. Parents and carers can tell you a lot and so can siblings. Parents and carers teach children how to live life: how to cook, and do the laundry, and drive. Parents and carers teach children about their family history and culture. To be able to teach their children, parents and carers need to have enough time, and sometimes that's hard to find because parents and carers are often so busy.

Budgeting and saving money are learned both at school and at home. Kids also need to learn about manners, respect and how to control themselves, and those things are learned both at home and at school.

What's missing?

There are things that some children don't get the chance to learn anywhere. Some schools teach wellbeing subjects, but not all. Sometimes in primary school, they teach you things that happen to you as a kid, but they don't teach you what happens as an adult. It's important to learn how to take care of yourself. Some children do not have the chance to learn about basic needs for their body, like food and nutrition, or keeping clean and looking after your skin. Those things are important, and all kids need to learn about them, but sometimes they don't.

Children also need to learn how to deal with stress. Some kids are really overwhelmed with stress, but they don't know who to talk to about it. It would be good for kids to learn how to deal with stress, especially if they don't feel comfortable talking to anyone about it. Kids are especially worried about going to high school or being in high school. Some kids have issues with their friend groups and some are worried about school work – there are so many things that are stressful and can make things seem overwhelming. Some kids have real struggles with mental health. Sometimes they want to ask their parents, carers or teachers for help. Any teacher should be happy to help a kid they are teaching who is stressed, or

overwhelmed, or worried. Sometimes kids have no one to talk to, so they need to learn how to deal with stress themselves. Right now, a lot of children never learn about stress and schools need to teach about that.

There is no right way to learn

All children should have the same opportunities, and they should do what they love and follow their dreams. What we learn is important to make sure children have the chance to pursue their passions – but how we learn makes it fun or boring, exciting or upsetting. There are lots of good things about school, but it could be improved. There needs to be more ways for kids to learn, because everyone learns differently, there is not just one way of learning. Schools should ask what kids actually want: how they want to learn and where they want to learn. It has to be sensible and sometimes kids need to learn things, even if they don't like it. But being sensible about learning doesn't mean it has to happen in just one way.

Learning can be fun when it's like a game and it's interactive. It's fun when you learn by testing things, like in science you can test how fast a ball goes. It can be fun to do inquiry subjects and research on things you are interested in. Sometimes teachers use games to try to make learning fun. For example, there might be a game about a maths problem: you give the answer and jump forward, to the side, or back. But some children take a long time to work out the answer and it can get awkward or boring, so if there's a game or an activity, it needs to be adjusted for the level of each child.

The best way of knowing how kids best learn is to ask us. We will learn best when we get to make decisions about how we learn. We will enjoy learning when we feel comfortable, have fun, and can follow our passions. We need to have some choices about how we learn.

There are some things that schools could start with: we should be able to decide if we sit on the floor or at our desk; sometimes we have to sit on the floor for too long. Kids should be able to decide if they want to work in groups or on their own. When there are groups, it's important the groups are right because children won't learn well if they don't get on with their group.

Teachers are very important, but children also learn from each other. Sometimes children are better at explaining things, and children know their friends well and understand how they learn. It can be great to learn from people who are interesting and inspiring (like authors or astronauts). It can be exciting when those people come to school to share what they do and how they

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learned about it. Children also learn by doing things and going on excursions to *experience* more. We need opportunities to do things we are interested in because that's when we learn best and most.

Kids learn best when teachers are caring and happy to teach them. Sometimes kids get yelled at every time they talk, or because they don't follow the teacher's rules. It's hard to get yelled at. Most teachers want to teach kids, and sometimes kids want to talk with teachers on their own, but that's hard when there are lots of children in the class and teachers don't have time. It's best when teachers have time to explain and have time to help children who are frustrated. Sometimes teachers put stress on children with things like due dates and deadlines. It is best when teachers give students the time they need to learn and to understand.

It's good to have consistency of teachers. At primary school there is one teacher for the year, and it can be disruptive if there is a change of teacher. However, having more than one teacher can be good, because different teachers have different ways of explaining. Having a teacher and learning support assistants in the classroom is good. In high school it's harder because there are different teachers for every subject, and kids don't get to know their teachers as well.

It is good to have strong relationships with classmates, but sometimes other kids make it hard to learn. Being distracted by other kids, like when they are flicking pens or pulling pieces of the mat, is disruptive. Sometimes fidgets help, because it keeps kids occupied and stops them from distracting others. Maybe kids wouldn't get so distracted and be so annoying if they had more choice about how they learn and were kept active.

Conclusions

This article talks about the things about learning that matter to children. There are some parts of learning, both in school and outside, that are great; but some things need to change. In concluding this article, we have five messages for adults who make decisions about what kids learn and how we learn.

- Learning should be interesting, but it doesn't always have to be fun. Sometimes it's important to face challenges in learning, and that can be hard but it's rewarding.
- Not everyone learns in the same way. It would be good for children to have more choice about how they learn. It would be a good idea for teachers to have one-on-one meetings with kids so they know where kids are at.
- You can learn from mistakes, not only by doing things well.
- Cultural awareness is very important, especially being respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.
- It can be hard to do things alone but with care and support, it is a bit easier for kids. With support, children can reach their dreams.

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