Understanding Children's Informal Learning

EMERALD STUDIES IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING

Series Editors: Professor Tim Jay, University of Nottingham, and Associate Professor Jo Rose, University of Bristol.

Emerald Studies in Out-of-School Learning focuses on the thinking and learning that children engage with outside of school, mainly in primary age groups from 4 to 11 years. Books in the series emphasize the ways in which such out-of-school learning does and does not align with children's classroom learning, and the potential barriers to, and opportunities for, synergy between these two contexts. A key feature of the series is the problematization of out-of-school learning in terms of its alignment (or otherwise) with classroom learning.

This series examines some of the complexities of researching out-of-school learning, and the need for new conceptual and methodological approaches and provides a space for work that looks at both informal and formal learning outside of the classroom and will help to scope and shape this growing discipline.

Understanding Children's Informal Learning: Appreciating Everyday Learners

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To our parents: Ellie and John, Sheila and Paddy, Barbara and Spencer

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Foreword

Dana Mitra, Penn State University

As a researcher of student voice, I define student voice as opportunities to participate in and influence the educational learning and decisions that shape students' lives and the lives of their peers. This book extends student voice to children's voice by broadening the definition of learning to include out-of-school spaces.

This book engages in important bridging of inside and out of school spaces. It expects that part of the learning process in school is to understand what inspires and motivates young people outside of learning spaces. It speaks to the value of child-driven learning and agency in what and how to learn.

The book demonstrates how focusing on efficacious and agentic learning can build curiosity and confidence in young people. This definition of learning is much broader than benchmarks and skillsets and must be measured more deeply and authentically than is possible with standardised testing. A focus on children as learners then shifts a classroom focus from reducing deficits to building on strengths and assets.

Childhood, then, is not about transitioning to adulthood. Instead, it is a time of valuing the talents and gifts of the young person in that moment – a stance taken by the Childhood Studies movement (Hammersley, 2017). Childhood is a time of being rather than becoming. From a stance of childhood as agentic and empowered, schooling can be a bridge to expanding learning occurring in all parts of life rather than solely in the building. The book speaks to the concept of Funds of Knowledge (González et al., 2005) as a way to describe how to broaden the scope of what knowledge is valued in schools and communities.

This book creates an expectation that schooling and teaching should include efforts to listen and learn from children. This perspective shifts the role of young people in school settings. It affirms that the role of children in school and out of school is not only one of voice and participation, as put forward in many child rights documents. Instead, it speaks to the need for young people to influence policies, the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the climate of schools. Lundy (2007) describes this broadening to be about space (opportunities to consider child perspectives); audience (adults to listen to child perspectives); and influence (results and consequences based on the impact of child opinions). This shift in perspective places greater onus on adults to change their relationships with young people and for the process of children's voices to have follow through.

The book intentionally focuses on some of the most historically silenced voices in New Zealand. It focuses on students in socioeconomically challenged communities with high levels of Māori populations. Significant care was given to partnering with Māori and Pacific researchers to understand and interpret data and results. An ethical approach to research in this book included having students engage as co-researchers to help make sense of and interpret data. Researchers also only entered into spaces and places where they had an explicit invitation from young people. They also looked at ways that adults could support and scaffold the youth researcher experience so that the concept of research itself is intergenerational.

Communities that have faced colonization and discrimination tend to have great dissonance between home and school space. I find the concept of Multiple Worlds (Phelan et al., 1998) helpful to describe this boundary crossing of experiences and identities. The idea is similar to code switching – that dissonant contexts require the ability to switch language and identity to feel like one belongs. The book speaks of a similar process in Chapter 8 when it cites the work of Jean Clandinin et al. (2006). It discusses 'ways to live by', explaining that children tell stories about their lives to make sense of what they are experiencing. When shifting contexts no longer fit their story, they experience tension, and conflict and must expend energy and emotion to re-envision the story to fit these new contexts. It also suggests the responsibility of adults to notice when and how children are rewriting their narratives and how to help scaffold these experiences.

The book builds this 'ways to live by' stance by using methodologies that are child-centred and extended over three years of data collection. These methodologies included open-ended interviewing of students to understand their construction of concepts such as learning. Their processes also included student-led data collection techniques such as collage creations, creation of interview protocols with young people, and digital documentaries co-constructed with teachers and students.

I expect that the greatest impact of this study will be the applications of the CRISPA framework. We find that outcomes of student voice research for young people include agency/becoming, belonging/relationships, and competencies/learning how to learn (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). The CRISPA framework adds a much greater emphasis on culture and collective identity. I suspect that this construct increases in importance the greater the dissonance between the home and school. The CRISPA framework also places needed emphasis on affect/emotion.

The contribution of this book is that it stretches the concept of learning and of students to be broader and deeper. It places greater agency in the beliefs and activities of young people. It places great expectations on practitioners and policy makers to broaden their understandings of possibility, and with this possibility, the scope of what wellbeing, knowledge, and action can look like for young people.

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Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi
(With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive)

This whakataukī (proverb) from te ao Māori (the Māori world) evokes community, collaboration, and the interdependence and collective effort involved in bringing the project that underpins this book to fruition.

We are indebted to the many courageous and curious people involved in supporting and working in this project over several years, all of whom shared a love of learning, a willingness to take risks, and a desire to explore the boundaries of what it means to learn in the everyday.

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learning in action in diverse learning areas and spatial arrangements across 12 school terms. We especially acknowledge those teachers who worked with us to try and help their students bring some of their everyday learning strengths into the interactional framework, routines, and relations of the classroom. They were: Mara Kean, Lyn Loveridge, Clare McIlhatton, Raewynne Hill, Maddy Speirs, Mary Burnett, Fiona Jensen, Lisa McFadzean, Matt Barnacott, and Marilyn Miller.

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We continue to be in awe of the 12 children who worked with us over 18 months as they explored and recorded their informal learning using digital tablets and then produced powerful, personal learning documentaries that they shared with their family, whānau, peers, teachers, and the researchers. We also thank those families who invited us into their homes or met with us at the school to talk with them, learn from them, and to explore their child's informal and everyday learning together. We acknowledge with gratitude the feedback and advice we received from the eight children from a non-participating school who acted as our Children's Research Advisory Group in 2016.

Chapter 1

Introduction

> *The first reaction of most people to the term learning is something to do with going to school.* (Illeris, 2017, p. 1)

According to Illeris, in the first instance, most people recall a learning situation quite specifically as archetypal classroom teaching, a scripted lesson in which the teacher and the students each take on their expected, conventional roles. Over time, as they progress through the stages or levels of the formal curriculum and its associated assessment or examination requirements, the students come to know that they are relatively good, or not so good, at school learning. This hegemonic view of learning as the outcome of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices combined is extraordinarily powerful and enduring. But it is also partial and misleading because, as Illeris notes, 'we all learn something throughout our whole lives' (p. 2). And in this sense, 'learning can appear positive or negative in nature, but for the individual it always has some purpose or other that has to do with managing life and its challenges' (p. 2). Through the arguments and evidence we present in this book, we encourage a more capacious understanding of children's informal learning, and consequently a greater appreciation of children as everyday learners. For the most part, we do this based on children's own conceptions of their learning when they are not at school. Ours is an inherently optimistic view of children's learning, one that is not reliant on normative achievement outcome measures, or judgements about whose knowledge is important. It is a view that permits children's learning to be seen as the continuous, agentic navigation of the many opportunities and challenges encountered in routine household, social group, local environment, and local community relations, amid the broader socioeconomic structural arrangements that materially shape these for better or worse.

Informal and Everyday Learning

When we speak of informal learning, we are referring to the learning that children engage with through everyday participation and interaction in their daily lives.

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Over time people have used different terms to talk about informal learning and concepts related to it. For example, Dewey (1916) distinguished between formal instruction and life experiences, and Vygotsky (1978) between scientific concepts and everyday concepts. At first, informal learning was defined in contrast with formal learning in early learning services and schools, which generally have prescribed curricula and are regulated by the state. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, informal learning was further contrasted with non-formal education. This is education that takes place in the community – for example, swimming lessons. Non-formal education is organised and structured, and has teachers and a curriculum but does not normally stipulate prerequisites. However, this approach to defining informal education focused attention more on what it is *not* rather than what it actually *is* (Schugurensky, 2015).

In their review of informal learning and formal learning, Scribner and Cole (1973) treated them as opposites. They initially focused on the place where learning occurred: informal learning taking place at home as children took part in the daily activities of adults, and formal learning occurring at school. Having reviewed the sparse research available at that time, they concluded that in classrooms there is often a mixture of informal and formal learning and that more research was needed to sort out the existing conceptual confusion. As research has expanded in this area, the usefulness of simple categorisations such as formal, non-formal, and informal learning has been further questioned. In particular, the point has been made that focusing on the location of learning does not reveal the processes of learning that are occurring (Rogoff et al., 2003; Schugurensky, 2015). Since the 1970s, there has been greater recognition of children's agency and the socialisation and informal learning that occur between children. It has also been acknowledged that these aspects of informal learning are not captured in the formal/non-formal/informal categorisations. More recently, significant arguments have been made to (i) move away from associating different kinds of learning with particular locations; (ii) explore the informal learning that takes place among children as well as between children and adults; and (iii) consider informal and formal learning traditions as just two out of many learning traditions that exist.

In recognition of these arguments, we use the terms 'everyday learning' and 'informal learning' interchangeably to refer to the learning that children engage in through the choices they and their families make about their participation in cultural, social, and daily life activities such as household chores, family interests, cultural groups, faith groups, music, performing and creative arts, individual and team sports, streetscape activities and sports, environmental protection and restoration activities, or simply hanging out in different places or online. The terms 'everyday' and 'informal' are also used interchangeably to capture the learning that takes place in formal and non-formal educational institutions through the interactions students have with each other and the knowledges and practices they encounter that are not part of official curricular activities. For example, while the official curriculum may teach students about social justice explicitly, practices within the school may contribute to social inequities and therefore may teach students about injustices implicitly. There are also many times in the day, such as lunch breaks, where students engage in a range of everyday learning relating to

the interests of their peers, popular culture, and how to negotiate friendships and family relationships (Fig. 1.1).

Researching Children's Informal, Everyday Learning

As Fig. 1.1 illustrates, in-school learning is part, but only part, of the totality of children's learning. When children learn, they always learn 'some thing' (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1996). Contexts and the people within those contexts influence the 'what' and the 'how' of children's learning. The point of departure for the three-year programme of the research reported in this book was to establish from children's perspectives and experiences, and in their words, what it means to learn in the everyday, and how they bring attention when making choices in their learning to that 'some thing' Marton writes about. Children's informal and everyday learning is often decidedly playful and leisurely in contrast to the seriousness and scripted formality of much of their timetabled school lives. In this project, we wanted to do a deep dive into what this contrast might mean for the formation of children's self-understanding, self-respect, and self-esteem

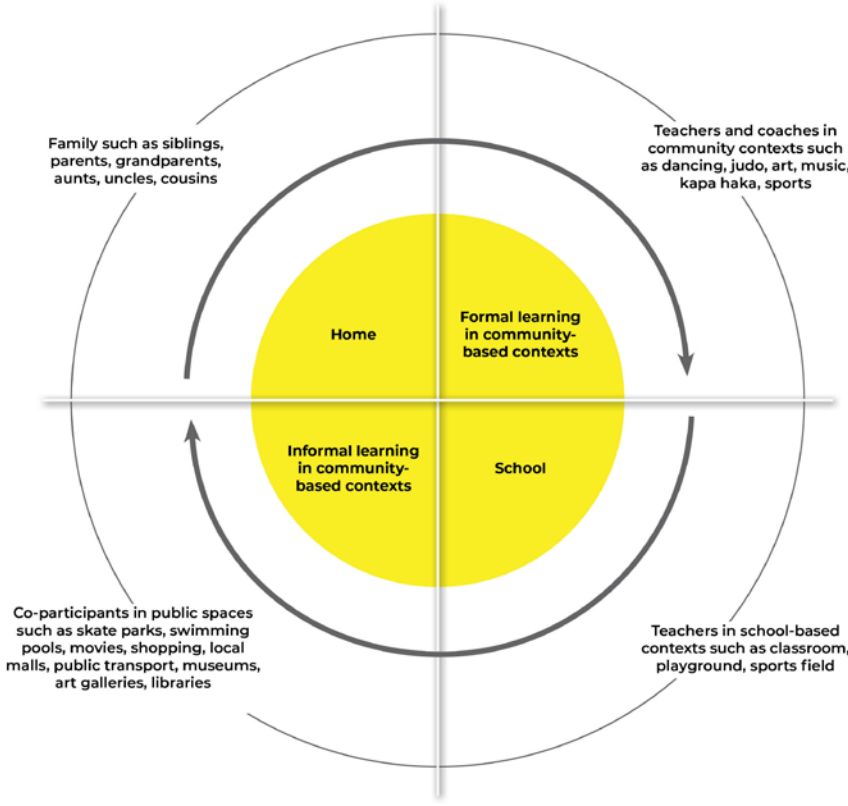

Fig. 1.1 Contexts for Children's Informal and Everyday Learning

(Honneth, 1995) within and across the various activity systems that constitute the whole of their lives. This is not in any sense to perpetuate a sharp distinction between in-school and out-of-school childhood experiences; quite the contrary, as Dewey (1910) contended, 'to be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition. Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, present of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic' (p. 218). Our project effectively sought a closer, more productive alignment of children's in- and out-of-school learning strengths and the opportunities provided by adults for them to draw on these. The overarching research question we developed for the research project was:

> *RQ*. How can knowledge of students' informal learning outside of school enhance teaching and learning practice in the classroom?

This question was broken down into two research sub-questions that we investigated progressively over the three years of project funding:

> *RQ1*. How can children meaningfully identify and document their own learning? (years 1 and 2)
> *RQ2*. What can teachers and family/whānau learn from children's out-of-school informal learning to better support them in formal and non-formal learning activities at school? (years 2 and 3)

Approaching the phenomenon of children's informal learning in this way implies the need to be able to map the qualitatively different ways in which children conceptualise and experience their learning through various activities, and also the critical factors that reveal why variations in learning exist both within and across those activities (Orgill, 2012). As we found in this project, children who have the most sophisticated conceptions of their learning are 'able to discern what is critical in the situation in relation to a certain aim and to focus on all that is critical simultaneously' (Marton & Pang, 2007, p. 1). In this book, we attempt to show how children discern and focus, to greater and lesser extents and in diverse ways, in their everyday lives in various home and community contexts. What this also reveals is that children's attention or focus for their learning changes and transforms within and across contexts to create the necessary conditions for their own learning. As Lundy (2007) has argued, affording children their right to have a say on matters important to them, and for them to be able to contribute to an understanding of their lives, can only happen when we listen and adapt practices, policies, and theories affecting children. A critical thread throughout this book is the involvement of children and their voice, using Lundy's heuristic (space, voice, audience, and influence). We worked alongside and with children to create the space for their voices. In many ways, the children led this process, and the researchers, the families, the teachers, and their peers became an audience to better understand informal and everyday learning. The influence these children had is documented throughout the book, and an issue we return to in later chapters.

The Breadth, Depth, and Variety of Children's Informal Learning Strengths

As our research questions (above) suggest, in this book, we report first on how we revealed the multidimensional nature of children's everyday learning; and second, how we then used this knowledge to explore various ways in which teachers and schools can work to bring more of the everyday learning strengths that all children have into the interactional framework of the classroom. At the heart of this endeavour is the notion that learning and development are integral to being a person, while both learning and teaching are integral to life as a social being. As professional educators, we are socialised to think of learning and teaching first and foremost as professionally planned, official curriculum-oriented activities that take place between teachers and students in the formal educational institutions of school and classroom. We also know that 'students' spend the considerably greater part of their days and years simply as 'children' and 'young people', learning less formally, both teaching and being taught by a wide range of other children and adults in multiple home, community, and virtual settings.

Similarly, Claxton (2021) argues that the concept of learning must be understood broadly and valued accordingly:

> The idea that learning is drilling facts and formulae into long-term memory works quite well for some limited kinds of learning (like remembering the kings and queens of England, or the periodic table) but not for others, such as learning to take penalty kicks, tell entertaining stories, appreciate Matisse, or understand the complexities of climate change. (p. 69)

Successful informal, everyday learning is a powerful mediator of how our lives unfold and the degree of agency or autonomy to learn that we believe we have. The examples of childhood relations, experiences, and pathways documented in this book provide numerous insights into the phenomenon of children's informal learning and what it means to be an everyday learner. As these children's accounts showed us, they participate in everyday activities and settings alone, and as members of whānau (family and extended family), friendship networks, faith and culture groups, activity clubs and societies, and the like. All this too involves learning and teaching in various degrees of intentionality and sophistication. In everyday activities and settings, children's repertoires of learning vary from the informal and incidental to the formal and instructional.

Similarly, whenever children are at home and in the natural and built environments of their local neighbourhood, they encounter diverse forms of teaching: personal and impersonal, physical and virtual. These forms of teaching influence and shape their learning, their understandings of themselves, their perceptions of the ways in which they are valued as recognised members of these groups, and the personal qualities they bring to those groups. Equally, as children's lives spread beyond the home, the immediate area, and the familiarity of known others, they learn to navigate and exert influence over new pedagogical forms such

as streetscapes and public spaces, advertising and commercial signage, fairs and festivals, museums and galleries, spoken word events, street theatre, fashion, body art, graffiti, games, the playing out of youth popular cultural rituals, and so on.

The nature and forms of learning and teaching in neighbourhood communities are also likely to vary considerably according to the child's social class location, and what they must learn to negotiate outside the home. In some communities, mobile truck shops, bottle stores, and fast-food outlets are ubiquitous; in others, gated housing enclaves, manicured playgrounds, and sports facilities. All communities, irrespective of wealth, contain a range of natural, built, and socially organised environments where children engage in valued activities and enjoyable learning. Children also learn a lot from their often multiple, fluid positionings within their birth and/or blended family structures, and through their or their family's interactions with agents and institutions of the state. The point is that everyday life provides innumerable opportunities for children as both learners and teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of how to act as autonomous agents and social beings. Typically, children are successful learners and teachers in many aspects of their everyday relations, activities, and settings. We all recall mental images of seeing children, young and old, showing each other how to perform highly valued skills, knowing or working out who to go to in order to obtain vital information, and experiencing how their actions are perceived by others in value-laden ways with attributions such as 'naughty' or 'good'.

More Than Basic Skills and Quantifiable Outcomes

Against this complex and fluid portrayal of children's learning, as researchers and educators we have become concerned at what we see as the increasingly narrow, simplistic focus on the quantifiable and measurable student achievement outcomes resulting from the years children spend in formal educational settings. As opposed to appreciative judgements about the holistic quality of children's learning and development which draw both on their time in early childhood education or school and their lives outside school. During the three years this project was undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand (2015–2017), education policy and professional discourses were dominated by Better Public Service targets, specifically the proportions of children in years 1–8 achieving at or above National Standards in reading, writing, and mathematics; and the proportions of students leaving upper secondary school with National Certificate of Educational Achievement Level 2.

At the time we designed this project, it seemed to us that an emphasis on achievement standards and targets had led well-intentioned politicians, officials, and educators to forget or overlook a very basic fact about learning that we all know from our own childhoods and from the experience of being parents or grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The fact is that:

> Children learn through the demands they meet and through the demands they put on others in everyday activities in activity settings participating in different institutions. Children's learning

> takes place through orientation to demands that dominate the different activity settings. (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 136)

In other words, children learn in complex and diverse ways in their everyday settings and activities.

We would argue that a narrow focus in schooling on threshold skills and benchmark achievement credentials is quite simply an inadequate adult response to children's needs and aspirations to acquire the broad repertoire of ways of knowing and ways of being they need for 'active participation in community life' (Noddings, 2003, p. 236) once they leave school. It seems sensible, then, to draw explicitly on the learning strengths (i.e. knowledge, skills, and dispositions) that children bring from everyday activities to the formal education setting of, in this study, the senior primary school. If the main purpose of schooling activity is to help children become more efficacious and agentic in their learning, then it seems logical to encourage children, and their teachers, to build explicitly on children's existing learning strengths. In that sense, we realised that our project would require us to work both with children and their teachers, as learners, within a broad scope of informal and everyday learning.

Framing the Research

During this three-year applied educational research project funded through the New Zealand government's Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, we intentionally sought several primary schools to partner with us in the research. The schools were all in socioeconomically challenged communities. We also made a conscious decision to carry out the project in ethnically and culturally diverse communities. On the one hand, these choices were for us an issue of social justice – based on the maxim that one should undertake educational research where it is likely to have the most benefit. On the other hand, we went into the research anticipating that it would be in such communities where we might expect children to experience and have to negotiate the most challenging differences between the cultures of their home and community and those of their classroom and school.

A distinguishing characteristic of these urban communities and of the children who participated in the study was their bicultural and multicultural diversity. To better understand their childhood worlds and appreciate their conceptions of informal and everyday learning, we needed as a research team not only to draw directly on the knowledge and guidance of our Māori and Pacific research advisors but also to familiarise ourselves with the available literature. A significant majority of the children who participated in the project identified as Māori. So, in this introductory framing of the research, we want to pause briefly here and draw particular attention to this characteristic of the project.

Considerable care is needed in this regard. As Georgina Stewart (2021) cautions, we should not assume that language and concepts from te ao Māori (the Māori world) can unproblematically be translated into English. As she puts it, there is a 'slippery path between imperialism and romanticism' (p. 15) in attempting to extract complex, nuanced indigenous concepts that are understood and

embodied in one world and insert them simplistically and instrumentally in another majority culture context. Similarly, Pere (1994) writes about 'the hermeneutic difficulty of expressing the concepts of one culture in the language of another' (p. 1). Both Stewart and Pere state that they are prepared to share only a part of their tribal knowledge publicly in their writing. As a team of predominantly non-Māori researchers, we needed to recognise the inevitable partiality of our understanding of the views and experiences that were shared with us by tamariki Māori (children) and their whānau during the research. There are, nonetheless, published accounts of world views, knowledges, values, and child development practices, both traditional and contemporary, that provide a general audience with helpful insights on childhood in te ao Māori.

A few English language studies have recorded lived experiences of childhood in traditional ancestral tribal communities in the period before the major urban migration of Māori following the Second World War. According to *Te Ara The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, the Māori population changed from 83% rural to 83% urban between 1936 and 1986. More recently, contemporary Māori writers have commented on the present-day dissonances of growing up and living in accordance with enduring Māori cultural values in urban, nuclear families set within individualistic western political, economic, and social structures (e.g. Durie, 1997; Stewart, 2021). For example, the tension between developing independence and interdependence:

> Throughout Māori thought, interdependence is emphasised as a desirable state, necessary for the achievement and maintenance of healthy development. In contrast to Western emphases on individualism and independence, pursuit of individual interests without heed for the concern of others is considered an unhealthy state. Although such traits are discouraged, open criticism is rare; instead change is to be encouraged through open approval of exemplary models. (Durie, 1997, p. 147)

Essential elements of healthy development and wellbeing for Māori are ancestral, genealogical, place-based, and linguistic connections that nurture what Durie calls 'a vitality of spirit':

> Key factors in identity formation for Māori which promote collective and individual wellbeing for healthy development in a culturally appropriate manner, are taken to be ancestral connections through whakapapa or genealogy, combined with access to ancestral land or tūrangawaewae, bound together by the ancestral language, Te Reo Māori. From these combined strengths a vitality of spirit can emerge capable of expressing te ihi me te wehi o te mana Māori, all that is excellent about being Māori. (Durie, 1997, p. 142)

Self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging (to land and people) are essential to this emergent spirit and children's engagement with their childhood worlds: