

Emerald Studies in  
Child Centred Practice



# Learning Allowed

Children,  
Communities  
and Lifelong  
Learning in a  
Changing World

Sam Frankel  
Caroline E. Whalley

LEARNING ALLOWED

# EMERALD STUDIES IN CHILD CENTRED PRACTICE

Series Editor: Sam Frankel, King's University College, Western University, Canada

*Emerald Studies in Child Centred Practice: Voice, Collaboration and Change* seeks to reposition the place of childhood studies as a discipline, highlighting its social value. This series explores the application of theories from childhood studies in practice. It highlights the place, purpose and power of these theories to inform practice and seek to shape a child-centred approach across the settings within which children live and experience their everyday lives – schools, families, the law and the care system. Uniquely, books in the series will not only draw on academic insight but also include the perspectives of both practitioners and children. The series makes the case for the need for a shared dialogue as a foundation for re-imagining practice.

This new series offers a new and valuable dimension to childhood studies with relevance for how wider society comes to engage with it. Indeed, it offers a chance for childhood studies to increase its presence in society – to demonstrate how an awareness of children's agency and the constructed nature of society can positively influence discourse and debate – with the hope that this can increasingly shape policy and practice and add value to children's everyday experiences.

Proposals are welcome for the series that align to this goal and help us to develop and grow childhood studies. This series is particularly keen to explore multifaceted aspects of children's lives, such as schooling, home lives, children's rights, child protection, activism, and more.

# LEARNING ALLOWED: CHILDREN, COMMUNITIES AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN A CHANGING WORLD

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-401-5 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-80117-400-8 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-1-80117-402-2 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*SF: Moira, Ruari, Rosie, Maria and Elsie  
CW: Adam and Alex  
and all those we have learned with.*

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# FOREWORD

The internet was going to be a second enlightenment. I remember the hope and anticipatory zeal that burned in the eyes of its prophets. It would democratise learning in unimaginable ways and provide emancipating opportunities for all. Everyone on the planet would have immediate free access to the best recorded thinking of all the 117 billion humans<sup>1</sup> who have lived. How could standing on the shoulders of all the intellectual giants of the past be a bad thing?

Well, we massively underestimated the degree to which videos of kittens would be more interesting than string theory. And whilst the best thinking of the greatest thinkers is mostly available and mostly free, it is buried under a mountain of bullshit and deliberate untruth that is growing exponentially. In the past, every village had an idiot but the worst they could do was to corner you in the pub and bore you for 20 minutes about how the moon landings were faked. With the advent of the internet and its unforeseen facility to promulgate untruth and undermine reasoned debate, they can now become world leaders.

In this light, or rather in this gloom, the challenge to those who would create learners is stark. If we want the world to be better for our children. . . Dammit, if we want the world to *exist* for our grandchildren, we need to make more people better learners for longer! This challenge transcends formal education systems and threatens nations.

Dr Sam Frankel and Dr Caroline Whalley suggest in this book that great teachers imbue their students with a sense of agency over their own learning processes that they will carry forward for the rest of their lives. But learners can also do it for themselves by understanding their underlying meta-cognitive operations. ‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life or whether that station will be held by anybody else. . .’<sup>2</sup>, should not be a question in the mind of one who allows themselves to learn and to be a learner.

If we are to save the enlightenment, we need to build on its platform. ‘Cogito ergo sum’ postulated Descartes. Sartre later challenged, arguing that,

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1 Source Population Reference Bureau Nov 2022.

2 Opening line of ‘David Copperfield’, *Charles Dickens*.

'Existence precedes essence'. Sam and Caroline are effectively suggesting that, 'To be is to learn'.

*Hugh Greenway*  
Chief Executive – The Elliot Foundation

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book really does represent a *Journey* and the interactions that we have had with so many others. Our thanks therefore must start with all those that we have had the chance to learn alongside, whether that be family or friends, children or university students, professionals, parents or researchers. It is these experiences and the conversations, observations, research and training opportunities they created, that we have drawn on in shaping our thinking for ‘learning allowed’.

SF: Thanks to those who read early versions of this book and for the ideas they shared – colleagues, students and former students at King’s University College, Western University and those connected through EquippingKids. A special thanks to John Fowler who has been so significant in my journey to explore and understand learner experiences over the years.

To Caroline – a very special thank you. Caroline brought her wisdom and clarity of thought to this project, acting as the critical friend I needed to express the ideas that were flying around in my head. The result was a ‘learning journey’ – where we sought to create knowledge by making sense of our experiences!

CW: Thank you to my dearest friend and alter ego Hugh Greenway, my friends and family plus the gang past and present at The Elliot Foundation who all believe dreams really can come true.

Thank you to Katy and all the team at Emerald for their patience and willingness to work with us.

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## WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT... ALLOWING LEARNING!

There is an urgent need for a rigorous conversation about the value we attach to ‘learning’ and ‘being a learner’. A mastery of (a) the processes and dimensions of learning and (b) how we make sense of our identity as a learner will advance not only our own capabilities and chances of self-actualisation and happiness, but also the possibilities for wider social transformation.

In this book, we recognise the challenges we face on a local and global level and search for ways to navigate these challenges as we invite you to be part of framing the solution(s) and to embrace the possibilities that this change has to offer. Our message is simple – the way we think about the ‘learner’ and ‘learning’ matters. Our sense of identity as learners shapes our motivation and ambitions, our goals and targets, impacting on our private, public and professional lives.

Learning usually centres on children and school. We want to provoke a broader discussion drawing on thinking and research that is child-based and relate this to all stages of our lives. Because of this universal approach, ‘teacher’, ‘facilitator’, ‘educator’ and ‘instructor’ are used interchangeably referring to any individual who enables ‘others’ on their learning journey.

Being ‘connected’ to our learning and possessing a positive identity as a learner recognises that ‘learning is being you’, taking us to the heart of what it means to be human and members of communities – local and global. We believe congruence between ‘you’ and ‘your learning identity’ offers a foundation to help us effectively navigate this changing world!

## OUR PASSION FOR LEARNING

This book reflects our passion for learning.

The initial goal of this book was to share some thoughts around children and learning. But as we wrote and chatted, our ambition grew as we realised that what we were learning from children had much wider application. As you read, we encourage you to reflect on your own lifelong identity as a learner, and how that cuts across whatever age or stage of life you are at.

As we share, we do use ‘I’ and ‘we’ (with ‘I’ without any further clarification relating to me – Sam). It allows us to draw on personal experiences as well as to recognise the contribution to our thinking that colleagues, amazing professionals, parents and, of course, children have made.

As you read, we want you to be aware that you do make a difference and that every interaction is an opportunity to bring about change in yourself as well as others. So, as well as offering the theory behind our ideas, we have suggested ways in which you can start to explore and extend these in your own practice. Throughout we have included sections labelled ‘extending the conversation’ with additional questions, references and thoughts to deepen the dialogue around the issues raised. We want you to advance even more effective ways of creating a culture where *all* are aware that learning is allowed.

## IT’S TIME FOR A CHANGE

This book does not presume to have all the answers; we want to spark discussions that advance the way in which you approach what it means to be a learner for yourself and those you learn with.

As a response to the coming chapters, we want to start many conversations with you by:

- challenging existing assumptions,
- questioning current practice,
- theorising developing arguments,
- hypothesising on making new connections,
- putting forward ideas on alternative engagement.

Aside from suggesting, proposing, presupposing and presuming, we want to ‘postulate’, by sharing with you our belief for learning as a basis to drive the conversation and to extend our shared understanding.

*We want learning to be allowed when ever, who ever, where ever we are - no ages or stages - creating positive learning identities and enduring connections to navigate our changing world.*

We question the existing modus operandi (MO) for learning that contributes little to social capital or individual happiness and is creating a disconnection between how we see ourselves as learners and our capacity to learn. We take a position that allows us to challenge out-of-date assumptions that are still determining how we approach learning, whatever the age and whatever the stage we are at.

We want you to think about assumptions that dominate, that limit and that lead to learners being defined in terms of what they lack or can’t do, and stagnant practice fixed by old-fashioned approaches defined by stages of development often correlating to age. We want you to re-imagine, change your practice and use language that celebrates the joy that emanates from a realisation of our innate ability to learn.

We are all a resource for the world. We need to be positive about our ability to learn and help others to do the same. We want you to speak up, influence and make a difference. Most importantly we need to be fully equipped to navigate through complexity, cope with a fluctuating geopolitical landscape, tackle the ‘its too hard to do’ boxes around issues such as social media and get to grips with the unsolvable – the wicked problems.

### Geo-political Landscape – The Growth of Authoritarianism

At the time of writing in 2023 we are at another crossroads. ‘Post-truth is pre-fascism’ writes Snyder (2019) in his book *Road to Unfreedom*. He explains how toxic ideas, autocratic power and ‘fake news’ spread from Russia into Ukraine, Western Europe and now to the United Kingdom and the White House. ‘Magical thinking’, and the open embrace of contradiction is causing many to draw on ‘1984’ analogies. In Orwell’s (1949) novel, much of the world is in perpetual war. The United Kingdom is part of a totalitarian superstate, led by Big Brother. It is through policing thought and an oversized PR machinery that a dictatorship is reinforced, constantly undermining history and the value given to independent thinking.

‘1984’ is fiction, but increasingly world events are inviting us to question where we are headed and how a rise in authoritarianism might be countered by a greater investment in the capacity of the individual to manage data and to draw balanced conclusions. It requires skills and strategies to . . .

- search and retrieve information from a variety of sources,
- explain concepts in different ways,
- link ideas together and identify sources,
- connect learning from across a variety of experiences.

In other words become and apply connected learning.

### Social Media and Mental Health

Another pervasive set of challenges are the issues we face around mental health and its association with the part social media plays in many of our lives. Only recently MSBNC broadcast the legal efforts of a US school board who were taking social media companies to court in search of damages for alleged harm to children’s mental health (MSBNC, 2023). This follows a growing sense of the risks social media poses to society (Haidt, 31/7/21). Jean Twenge’s book *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable* (2006) encapsulates the challenge. The interactivity of social media pages – ‘like’ on Facebook, ‘retweet’ on Twitter and the right and left swipe of dating sites like Tinder – emphasises an online environment where we are constantly comparing ourselves to others. This stress on our emotions demands deeper understanding. A more recent collaboration between Twenge and a team of academics highlights a correlation between smartphone ownership dating from 2012 (2012 marked the year that the majority of Americans owned a smartphone) and higher rates of teenage depression, loneliness, self-harm and suicide. There is a broader global impact for learning in schools, as reflected in relation to PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) scores. . .

*School loneliness increased 2012–2018 in 36 out of 37 countries. Worldwide, nearly twice as many adolescents in 2018 (vs. 2012) had elevated levels of school loneliness. . . The psychological well-being of adolescents around the world began to decline after 2012, in conjunction with the rise of smartphone access and*

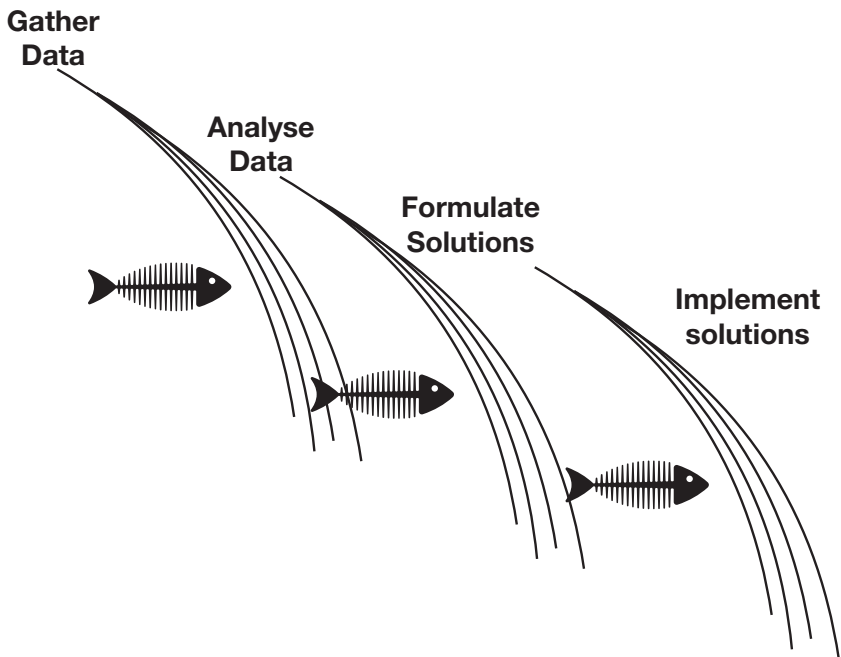
*increased internet use, though causation cannot be proven and more years of data will provide a more complete picture.*

(Twenge et al., 2021, p. 257)

Our assessment here is not on the place of social media in our lives, but more on the way in which we as humans are able to manage it. It is this capacity to be able to notice, make sense and then navigate the challenge that requires us to re-imagine what it means to be a learner.

### Wicked Problems

The nature of the local and global challenges we face can be characterised as ‘tame’ or ‘wicked’ problems. Tame problems can be solved by following a linear ‘waterfall’ process of resolution, as outlined in [Fig. 1](#).



**Fig. 1. Solving Tame Problems.**

However, as soon as problems become complex, the ‘waterfall’ process, with a focus on data collection to drive ‘solutions’, becomes inoperable.

‘Wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) are a class of dynamic and evolving problems with no obvious identifiable solution, involving multiple

stakeholders who may have conflicting interests and are managing contradictory evidence.

They are characterised by not having a set number of potential solutions, due to the fact that each problem is essentially unique. As a result, wicked problems can be interlinked and a symptom of other problems, meaning that there can often be more than one explanation. The result,

- *no definitive formula* to get to a solution
- *incomplete factors and complex interdependencies* as the norm
- *no stopping rule* – there's no way to know your solution is final
- *every attempt counts significantly* – there's no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error

(See Rittel & Webber, 1973)

### **Global Warming, an Example of a Wicked Problem**

Global warming is a wicked problem with no obvious solution. It is unique and has been talked about since the 1980s. It is difficult to solve, whether or not it is impossible to solve, we have to hope. It is an example of incomplete data factors, with a lack of reliable information about how much any country has reduced its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The scientific consensus that the climate is warming and this is being caused by humans is not subject to contradictory evidence to any significant degree – ‘the scientific consensus that humans are altering the climate has passed 99.9%’ (Guardian 19/10/2021); however, there is contradictory evidence regarding potential solutions, the pros and cons of nuclear energy, for example. Nations contain multiple stakeholders with different agendas and interests, political parties, lobby groups, think-tanks and big business.

## THE CASE FOR CONNECTED LEARNERS

We would argue that learning from experience is dependent upon the ability to understand how to learn and that only through an explicit understanding of how to connect our learning can each of us advance our learning capabilities. Navigating the geo-political landscape, rise of globalised communication and social media, mental well-being and interconnected wicked problems, bring

additional contradictions for us to resolve and with it more need for an approach to face these challenges with well-informed hope.

For us, that hope takes root in the connected learner, with an ability to make connections between the world we live in and our own sense of self. We do not live or learn in a vacuum, by making visible the social context for learning; we are more readily able to understand our capability as a learner. It is a desire to (re)ignite a passion to be a learner that provides the opportunities for us to advance our knowledge, skills and strategies to manage the complexities of the issues we face in our communities and beyond.

### Extending the Conversation

- (1) This was our first stab at “What is Learning Allowed?” pull it apart and develop further.

#### Learning Allowed

*enabling positive learning identities,  
through realising our capacity as ‘connected learners’*

*as we embrace ‘learning is being you’ – explored through the myriad of spaces and interactions that we encounter in our everyday lives, maximising learner potential through increasing the visibility of the different dimensions of a learning experience and enabling individuals to effectively navigate a changing world.*

- (2) The following quote highlight the complicated nature of the social world we are part of, explore this in the context of some of the social pressures noted above – what would you add?

*...we human beings live and think in immensely complicated social settings that have emerged from the uncoordinated choices and actions of billions of people over thousands of years. Emergent phenomena, such as actual languages, religions, governments, and communities, are at the heart of our moral concerns. Although human beings with evolved characteristics have made these institutions, they take on lives of their own and influence us profoundly while also structuring the decisions we make.*

*(Levine, 8/9/2014)*

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