

# Preface

No matter what you *do* today, you will learn. And if you were to think of one thing you have learnt this year, and if you were then to think about the context, place and any people who participated, and whether technology, nature, environment, machinery or books were involved, you would ultimately get to this question: How do I know I have learnt?

This book is about learners and their learning, and how they identify and often assess their own learning. Overall, the book asks and attempts to answer two questions, each based on the premise that learning occurs in all contexts, is measured in a few and is celebrated in others:

- How do we understand the phenomenon of learning in theory, practice, policy and over different contexts?
- How do students conceptualise learning and the self-assessment of their learning?

Learning is a phenomenon that defies definition but about which hundreds of theories abound. Some theorists argue that learning, as a concept, does not exist (Neisser, 1982). Others believe learning can only be understood through metaphors (Hager & Halliday, 2006). For children and young people, learning tends to be a phenomenon that creates a myriad of metaphors and imaginings about life. Before they even realise the complexities of this phenomenon, children can describe and discuss what learning, whether in formal or informal contexts and whether within or outside of school, means to them. And they soon understand that only certain forms of learning are assessed, namely those that their teachers can readily capture (measure) as “outcomes”. However, outcomes can also be thought of in terms of learners’ views of how they learnt a particular outcome. Here, the assessment, and the strategy used to assess the learning, is the learning experience itself.

Self-assessment is one such form of learning, and it is used by learners across contexts, both at and out of school. The everyday and often multiple learning contexts that young people enjoy, such as rollerblading, judo, swimming, ballet, skateboarding, provide them with authentic environments for learning through self-assessment. When self-assessment is not institutionalised, it plays a major role in helping them identify their learning goals and monitor their progress towards achieving them. Learning for students then becomes about them and their lives, and it leads to motivated, engaged learners who ask questions.

This is because young people are interested in their *own* questions about learning and life. Often when they seek answers through their own questions, they learn more than we can even imagine. They, and we, ask questions with the aim of gaining understanding and of knowing something in a different way; by asking questions, we learn. However, the questions that young children ask are not always those that we, as adults, *think* they are asking.

A television advertisement in New Zealand promoting a car depicts a father driving his young son home. The child, with a serious and intent expression, asks, “Dad, where did I come from?” The rest of the car trip shows the father elaborately describing “the facts” to the sound of Dean Martin belting out, “Let me tell ya ‘bout the birds and the bees and the flowers and the trees and the moon up above/ And a thing called love.” We see fireworks flash, water fountains spout and an array

of colourful depictions of life. At the end of the advertisement, having completed the journey and the careful explanation, the father parks the car. The child, bright eyed and excited by his new learning, says, "That's so cool, Dad! Jimmy Johnson only comes from Scotland!"

It is not just children who ask questions and then receive answers better suited to different questions. Sometimes we do not know the questions to ask, but we know *why* we are asking them. For example, when I was working some years ago as an educational psychologist, a teacher asked me to give a psychometric test to a young student. She said that the child's father had specifically requested that his daughter be given an IQ test. During my consultation with the father, he told me of his concerns about his daughter's learning and reading progress. He said he had spent time in a medical library reading up about psychometric tests, specifically, the WISC-R tests. He was convinced his daughter needed testing so her educational difficulties could be identified and her learning problem solved. I sensed the father saw the WISC-R test as a solution to a problem unlikely to be identified by his broad-based questions about IQ tests. So when I asked him, "What is it you *really* want to know?" he said, "I simply want to know why my daughter is not learning to read."

This question gave me a starting point for assessing the child and then providing her with an intervention different from that if I had gone the IQ route. Learning to read is a complex and intricate process that is not readily delineated through use of a psychometric test. This provides an overall test score with subscores, but scores are often irrelevant to the day-to-day teaching and learning that occurs in a classroom. I therefore asked the father if I could use another means of addressing his real question. He agreed.

My approach involved working with the teacher and the child within a classroom context to identify the strategies the child was using, to understand how she conceptualised learning and to determine where and how she was "expressing" the difficulty. The teacher and I looked at ways to support her and the child, especially in respect of offering additional strategies to facilitate reading progress. Within weeks, the child was on the road to becoming a reader, and the father never requested the "IQ" magic again. Nor, for that matter, did the teacher.

This assessment and classroom intervention involved working with the child in order to understand learning from *her* point of view. Children do not see the way adults see, nor do they think the way adults think. As Drummond (1993) found in her research in the United Kingdom, we adults assume we know and understand what children are saying, but in reality, we often do not. The work of Piaget (1929, 1979) has largely influenced our understanding of learning, particularly children's learning. For Piaget, the notion that children's thinking at any given age reflects a unique way of interpreting the world was especially important. This thinking, he said, is not inferior to adults' thinking. Rather, it is qualitatively different. It is this qualitative difference in respect of "thinking" that we can explore with young people so as to better understand their learning—and them.

On another occasion, also during the time I was working as an educational psychologist, I was asked to support a young girl who frequently disrupted her class during mathematics lessons in ways that challenged her teacher and prevented her peers from working. A few days later while observing this class during a physical education (PE) session, I was intrigued to see a child sitting in the sun on a bench, dangling her legs and reading a book, not participating in the PE activity but nevertheless appearing reasonably happy. We started to chat; she told me her name and why she was sitting there. I realised this was the child who had been referred to me as a "behavioural problem". She was not participating in PE because her inappropriate behaviour in the mathematics class preceding this lesson had led to her teacher using nonparticipation in PE as a solution for improving the child's behaviour. This child knew what she wanted: by misbehaving in a preceding mathematics class, she could miss her least favoured curriculum area—PE. Her reasoning in this regard showed her understanding of the system, albeit an understanding born of frustration. She had successfully personalised her learning but had marginalised herself from both her teacher and her peers along the way.

Throughout my practice as a psychologist, I encountered example after example of children and young people attempting to be heard, understood and recognised as successful learners, not "outcome robots". This experience led me to further study how students conceptualise learning and self-assessment in a range of

contexts. Interviews and observations that explored their views and experiences in both school and out-of-school settings disclosed a startling metaphor of learning. The students conceptualised learning in various ways, but the setting and the context made a difference: students operated differently according to the multiple contexts they experienced. Just like the child who did not enjoy the PE class, they adjusted their behaviour and learning to determine their degree of participation. Metaphorically speaking, these children changed colour—they were not the same child to all teachers, nor the same child in every setting. Many seemed to know this intuitively and chose when, how and where they acted in the way they did.

The “chameleonic learner” metaphor thus arose from my seeing how learners who achieve well in a range of areas and are accomplished in reading the cues of the learning activity and environment can adapt to that setting yet retain a strong sense of self. What became evident to me was that learners with highly tuned self-assessment systems can maximise their learning opportunities in a range of settings and contexts by changing their approaches to learning.

In the study I report in this book, the learners I observed tended to hold more sophisticated conceptions of learning in out-of-school than within-school contexts. Accordingly, for teachers, understanding students’ out-of-school learning contexts can provide invaluable sources and opportunities to develop thinking about learning for school-based settings. As we move to identify personalised learning experiences and opportunities for young people, our essential focus has to be on the learners and their motivation for that learning. To understand how to support this learning, we need to know the right questions to ask our students so that we can understand them as learners. Such questions as “Tell me something you have learnt?” and “How did you know that you had learnt it, and when?” are good starting points.

This book and the study it documents are driven by the belief that “children have much to teach us, if we but stop and listen” (Paley, 1979, p. 142). In writing this book, I wanted not only to validate student experiences in learning but also to acknowledge that even when students do not “appear” to be learning, they most often are. More specifically, my aim has been to explore—through theory, research and student voice—student learning and how this learning is assessed.

Valid expressions of learning enable young people to build their identity and capacity to learn, which is why I foreground, in this book, students' comments (voice) on what learning means to them, and how they know when they have learnt (self-assessment). In recognising student learning, we cannot help but recognise the teachers who support students to know learning in its many guises. Teachers may find it useful to read about these experiences in order to recognise and identify different ways of thinking about learning in classrooms. Learning is, after all, changing the way we think.

The study that I report in these pages follows on from several key studies on student learning. The studies involving children mostly drew on phenomenographic and ethnographic research methodologies. Both are ways of studying and understanding what learning means from the learner's perspective. A phenomenographic approach sets out to present a formal description and understanding of how people experience phenomena (Marton, 1981, 1988; Marton & Booth, 1997). An ethnographic approach seeks to identify the contexts within which these phenomena occur (Lave, 1996; Rogoff, 2003). Finally, while I include, in this book, national and international literature in the area, the voices of the young people in regard to how they conceptualise learning and self-assessment are from New Zealand.