

“Be beside me”: Exploring children and young people’s visions for belonging and citizenship

Madeleine Rose Dobson

Curtin University, Australia

Victoria Absalom-Hornby

Valuing Children Initiative, Australia

Elizabeth Baca

Curtin University, Australia

This paper reports on a study which focused on surveying children and young people (aged 4 to 17) regarding their experiences of childhood, schooling, family, and community. Participants focused on the importance of their connections to fellow children and young people, their families, and their educators. They identified ways for adults to care for them and to create connectedness and belonging whether at home or school. Participants also spoke to the value of their voices and views, and expressed a desire to be respected and recognised, whether on a personal level or with reference to broader systems such as government. Throughout the study, participants expressed appreciation regarding the opportunity to engage in research that explicitly focused on seeking and honouring their voices and views. For instance, one secondary-aged student stated, “Children can make a difference by sharing their perspective and expressing the way the world feels to them.” Recommendations are posed which have heightened relevance for educators, school leaders, and parents/carers. These relate to school culture, learning and teaching, caring for children, and relating to children.

Introduction

Children deserve to be recognised as citizens, unique individuals, and significant community members. To enable their right to voice we must create appropriate opportunities for children to express themselves and their views, to be heard in meaningful ways, and to actively participate in their contexts and communities. It is important to recognise the contributions that children can make. As we look to planning and decision-making for the future, we must elevate children to be included, as it will be their lives that are most influenced and impacted.

Often our world is designed by adults, for adults, and run by adults as major decision-makers. Therefore, children and young people are generally expected to abide by and/or adapt to adult designs and systems. Yet when thinking is altered and children are included from the start of decision-making, outcomes can be improved. This is applicable across settings and disciplines, including – for example – in terms of understanding children’s experiences in the care system to inform co-design of resources (e.g. Black, Hendry, Wright & Collings, 2023), considering their involvement and representation in family law (e.g. Family Law Council of Australia, 1996), and with regards to their participation in welfare and protection services (e.g. van Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen, 2015). In supporting children’s agentic and active contributions, we model belief in ability and provide affordance to act and learn in various environments. This opportunity to practice

capability and confidence in skills is a key component of lifelong learning (Scott et al., 2020).

When children are listened to and included, they feel valued, thus enabling a sense of belonging and wellbeing. The *Speaking out survey 2021* (CCYP WA, 2021) reported that children and young people want to feel valued, respected, and listened to, and to be assured that their ideas are taken seriously. By ensuring that they are, we build better communication which contributes to ensuring that all children can thrive.

The wellbeing of our children and young people is in the interest of all community members. Currently, and with regard to the Australian context, there are high rates of poverty (ABS, 2023) and child abuse (Mathews, 2023). It is evident that the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is a crucial issue meriting further attention (O'Reilly & Lester, 2022), particularly given that there is a heightened risk of trauma for children and young people who experience adversity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), and that childhood adversity impacts on adult mental health (Merrick et al., 2017). Concerns have been raised regarding the challenges that children face and the short, medium, and long-term psychological impacts (Nelson, et al., 2020).

There is movement around these types of issues – for example, Wales has implemented a Future Generations Commissioner, endorsed a *Well-being of Future Generations Act*, and included young people in the five ways of working through collaboration, integration, prevention, involvement and long-term work (Welsh Government, 2021). In Australia, the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) in each state/territory advocates for young people; to recognise, respect and defend the rights of children, with child safety a marked priority for the Commissioners' offices. The Western Australian Commissioner's office regularly undertakes research to include children's voices in key wellbeing analyses, providing data and insight into the views and experiences of children across school grades 4-12 in WA (CCYP, 2020). Such work highlights how children are experiencing life, reporting that mental health is a critical issue for them, and a sense of reduced safety due to physical harm from adults (CCYP, 2021).

Furthermore, work is being undertaken in some Australian states and territories around child and youth wellbeing (e.g. Tasmanian Government, 2022), including funding programs which support schools to implement trauma-informed pedagogies and practices (e.g. NSW Government, 2021; Tasmanian Government, 2022). It is critically important that initiatives like this are sustained and further progressed with an emphasis on centring children and young people, and their needs, identities, and rights.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) states that children should be able to share their opinions and have them considered in decision-making (Article 12) and that children should be able to access and share information (Article 13). In line with the Convention, we support a view that children and young people have valid and important contributions to make about themselves, others, and the world. There is a need to engage in further research where the voices and values of children and young people are explored, to empower positive inclusion of children into the future.

This paper reports on a study focusing on children’s views about our world, inclusive of their families, schools, and local communities; their perception of living in the world as a child; and whether they feel valued by the adults in their lives.

Background

Across all stages of childhood, research indicates that from early years, through primary school ages and into adolescence, that mentally healthy children have a stronger chance of succeeding into adulthood. Mentally healthy children have a sense of belonging and community, especially when they have been included in decision making and communication about their future. In the Australian early learning sector, emphasis is placed on educators developing responsive, trusting, and respectful relationships with children, which contributes to children feeling connected and confident in their identity and their place in the world (ACECQA, 2023). Further to this point, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Early Years Learning Framework, 2022) emphasises children’s connectedness with and contributions to their world:

Children’s connection and contribution to their world is built on the idea they can exert agency in ways that make a difference and build a foundation for civic and democratic participation. (p.38)

While there is a clear vision in some spaces for children and young people to develop a sense of belonging, community connectedness, and democratic participation, this is not necessarily reflected in lived experience. For example, in the 2021 *Speaking Out Survey* from the Commissioner for Children and Young People of Western Australia (CCYP WA, 2021), key findings included that participants were not experiencing a sense of belonging in their communities and that they felt limited autonomy. Concerns were also raised about their schooling experiences – for instance, participants engaged in secondary schooling reported that they “do not like learning, do not feel like they belong at school, and feel it’s less important to attend regularly”. (p. 5)

When young people have access to regular methods of communication with adults and decision-makers, they feel respected. Giving young people platforms to have a voice contributes towards ensuring that they understand that their opinions and views are important and are recognised as valuable contributions. However, listening followed by action is when young people really feel ‘heard’ (ACYF, 2022). On this note, there are many ways in which adults can engage children and young people to have a voice. For example, facilitating opportunities for various forms of play is not only a right of children (United Nations, 1989) but also an integral part of life and learning. Notably, play and learning are so closely linked that they are often indistinguishable (Pendlebury, 2016). Play is linked to imaginative and creative thinking (Sansanwal, 2014) and problem-solving (Solis, Curtis & Hayes-Messinger, 2017). As well as promoting key social-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive skills, and contributing to healthy child development, play can facilitate the formation of safe and nurturing child-caregiver relationships (Yogman et al., 2018). This provides opportunity for connection, dialogue, and understanding.

There are continuing calls to listen to children and young people, particularly regarding their vision for the future. A key example in this regard is the *Youth Recovery Plan* (World Economic Forum, 2021). As young people are most effected by the current world crises, they must be part of the solution to creating positive change. The plan details a guide to action a more inclusive future and comprises principles such as collective action, making space for diverse lived experience, and caring for community (World Economic Forum, 2021). There is a clear emphasis on justice in a multi-dimensional sense, with a call for climate, fiscal, and social justice. Critically, children and young people are positioned as best-placed to lead transformative action (World Economic Forum, 2021). To facilitate this, intergenerational dialogue is key, and focus is placed on interactive dialogue, respect, and understanding (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Children and young people who feel connected with education, community, and their world are more likely to thrive and have improved health outcomes (OECD, 2017; Steiner et al., 2019). There is a marked need for further research, particularly in Australia, focusing on children and their perspectives and experiences, especially those concerning their sense of citizenship and connectedness to community. In keeping with this need, the present study sought to engage children and young people (aged 4 to 17) in survey research focused on eliciting their views regarding their experiences of childhood, schooling, family, and community.

Method

This study employed a survey method to ask children aged 4-17 about their experiences of childhood, school, family, and community, with an emphasis on what they most valued in their lives and how valued they felt in their communities.

Ethics

Human research ethics approval was granted by the relevant institutional authority. Informed consent was obtained from the school leadership to grant access to the school site and its enrolled students. All parents/carers and students were provided with participant information forms, and dual informed consent (from parents/carers) and assent (from children) was required in order for students to participate. All survey data was fully de-identified, with the only demographic data indicated being the participants' year level.

Researcher positionality

We approached this study with a focus on eliciting, understanding, and honouring the voices of children. As adults leading the data collection and analysis, we are positioned very differently to the participants in terms of life stage and possess adult-oriented perspectives and experiences. Throughout this study, we maintained a focus on acknowledging our standpoint and positioning, and were continually engaged in reflection regarding how we approached the research in terms of conceptualisation, ethics, data

collection, analysis, and write-up. This is further addressed in the discussion section in terms of limitations and future directions.

Participants

Participants were students enrolled at a participating Kindergarten to Year 12 (K-12) school in Western Australia, in the Perth metropolitan area. With a grade range of K-12, enrolled students spanned 4 to 17 years of age. The distribution of socio-educational advantage was concentrated in the middle and top quarters, with a majority of students having an English-language background.

All participants opted into the study with informed parent/carer consent and informed student assent. The distribution of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant distribution across year levels

Stage	Year level	Year level total	Stage total
Early childhood	Kindergarten	16	90
	Pre-primary	19	
	Year 01	22	
	Year 02	12	
	Year 03	21	
Middle and upper primary	Year 04	29	90
	Year 05	28	
	Year 06	33	
Lower secondary	Year 07	29	91
	Year 08	31	
	Year 09	31	
Upper secondary	Year 10	18	66
	Year 11	21	
	Year 12	27	
Total participation			337

Initially, 337 students signed on to participate, though there was some attrition evident with the overall response rate sitting at 326 – this is due to nine participants declining to proceed when they accessed the online survey, and instead opting to exit.

Survey

A survey was designed and utilised to gather students’ perspectives and experiences regarding their place in their family, school, and community. The survey, which was built in *Qualtrics*, comprised fourteen questions (see Appendix 1) with a blend of open-ended/close-ended items which sought to gather attitudinal and experiential insights from participants.

Participants accessed the survey online via *Qualtrics* and self-reported what they valued in their lives and how valued they felt as an individual. Early years participants (Kindergarten

to Year 3) were guided through their survey experience by the researchers, who sat one-on-one with participants to explain the survey and to assist with responding. Where participants were willing and capable, they used an *iPad* to respond. Where participants preferred and/or needed greater assistance (e.g. where participants were younger and/or were at an earlier stage of literacy/fine motor development), the researchers used the *iPad* to lodge the participants' selected and reported responses. In the latter instance, participants had full view of the *iPad*, were in dialogue with the researcher about their responses and how these were being entered, and were able to check and confirm that all submissions were accurate.

Middle primary through upper secondary participants (Years 4 to 12) were responsible for accessing and completing the survey during school hours. The school ensured that ample time was allocated for this task, with teachers available to guide, support, and assist. The teachers were briefed beforehand by the researchers so that they were prepared to help participants with their survey experience and responses where needed.

Data analysis

The study involved both quantitative and qualitative analyses. All closed-ended questions in the survey were subject to quantitative analysis where the data was examined in terms of frequency and trends. All open-ended questions were subject to qualitative analysis within *NVivo* where data was subject to inductive thematic analysis. We engaged in reflexive thematic analysis as this was well-aligned to the nature of the study, which focused on affording voice to children and young people about their lives and lived experiences. In particular, our work was informed by the following from Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry (2018, pp. 848-849):

The aim is to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data. The researcher is a storyteller, actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge.

An immersive process involving deep familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was undertaken, wherein the researchers read and re-read through the whole dataset to ensure deep familiarity with the content. Coding and theming were undertaken in a six-phase process which was iterative and reflexive (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2018), with attention continuously afforded to Patton's (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure that the themes spoke coherently to the data and provided an internally consistent account of the data.

This paper predominantly reports on the thematic analysis and the consequent findings, with the intent of maintaining a strong emphasis on the voices and views of the participants.

Findings

Overall, the data reflected that the participants valued their sense of connectedness: to their families, peers, school, and community. In terms of connectedness to community, the participants raised priorities around and visions for active participation and contribution, especially where environmental issues were concerned. This section explores the data through the main overarching themes, which were: (1) the value of connectedness and belonging; and (2) visions for active citizenship.

“Be beside me”: The value of connectedness and belonging

The relationships that participants held with friends, family, and educators were identified as highly important and meaningful. Participants often afforded focus to the sense of connectedness and belonging that they experienced in these relationships. Across all age groups, participants spoke about their need to experience connectedness across multiple contexts and relationships. They were often clear in articulating what their experiences or expectations were in this regard, which often revolved around kindness and compassion. For example, one early childhood student spoke about the importance of their loved ones “be[ing] careful and kind”, while another reflected on kindness from friends “[making them] feel valued and respected”. A primary student shared that they appreciated how their family “trust [them], love [them], and give [them] courage”.

Parental care and support came to the fore as something many participants valued. One primary student stated: “My parents always looking after me and taking care of me, keeping a roof over my head, always being there for and always believing in me (sic)”. A lower secondary student expressed appreciation for their father’s care and support: “I value my Dad because he supports me no matter what and I can always get a hug from him.”

Some responses were reflective of limited connectedness or an absence thereof, or barriers to connectedness. This was most apparent in the upper secondary cohort – for instance, one student stated: “There isn't enough kindness in high school culture, I think that is a huge problem that schools need to be aiming to fix for the better of people’s wellbeing.” In keeping with this, another student expressed that they didn’t feel valued by their peer group: “I feel as though my friends would be able to move on very quickly if I wasn't around. [This shows] the lack of value they have for me” – while another raised concerns about peer dynamics: “I just wish that everyone could get along and that people were valued based on their attributes”.

While these issues were most prevalent for upper secondary students, there were some key instances where the lower secondary cohort were reflective about limitations around connectedness. One student who was enrolled through the school’s boarding program reflected, “I value my family above anything and this is hard because I am a boarder so I struggle to connect with them over the phone unless it is the weekend. I have to find other people to connect with.” Another student discussed connection in the context of

friendship and wrote, “Friendship is so important to me. But I can't help feeling my friendships are only one way.”

Looking right across the age span, participants identified a range of ways in which other people could care for and support them – particularly adults. Again, themes of care arose, as did an emphasis on children and young people wanting to be listened to. Illustrative responses are captured in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants’ reflections on care and support

Stage	Illustrative quotation
Early childhood	Be beside me. Love me and take care of me. There’s too many ways. Listen to us more.
Primary	By listening and supporting us in all things that we do. Help me let my creative side out! Talk to you peacefully, believe in you.
Lower secondary	Help me and guide me.
Upper secondary	They can be open to listening to your ideas and being there to support you. Just ask how you are going from day to day life. Value student mental health more.

One student from the lower secondary cohort provided a more extensive response which linked back to the issue of how adults perceive and then treat children and young people:

[Adults can value me] by including me in conversations and treating children more sensibly, because often I think adults can judge a teen or a child as being silly when some kids are really smart kind and funny and have amazing qualities. For parents, they need to be a good parent [by] listening to their child and actually try and help them.

Overall, it was evident that connectedness was significant and meaningful to the participants, and that many had a clear sense for what they expected and/or hoped for in terms of adults being responsive to their needs in this regard.

“We could all unite together, and together we could all make a change”: Children’s visions for active citizenship

A prevailing theme related to the participants’ desire to and visions for making a difference in their communities. A majority of participants felt that it was important for children and young people to make a difference (n=256). In terms of what difference the participants wanted to make, there was extensive focus on the environment, sustainability, and climate action with a range of ideas articulated by participants across the age span. Many participants focused on an overarching commitment to caring for and protecting the environment. One primary-aged student voiced an aspiration to “bring more sustainability to the world and inspire others to do that with us”, which was reminiscent of a number of responses focused on action for the good of the community. One lower secondary student discussed “setting goals... for the good of humans and most

importantly the environment” as a key contribution they felt that they and their peers could make.

Where specific issues were identified by participants, these predominantly comprised the climate crisis and the rights and welfare of animals. Some of these concerns were linked in with current curriculum priorities within the school – at the time of data collection, the early childhood stage was focused on marine wildlife and sustainability. One student stated: “I really don’t want sea lions to get hurt with rubbish and suffocate and die. I would get the rubbish off of them and I would just get a grabber and get it off there.” Looking further across the data, similar concerns, passion points, and priorities were evident. The secondary students were particularly interested in advocacy and activism. For example, one upper secondary student reflected: “I feel that we can speak out together and include things in our schools where we collectively try and solve problems such as lowering emissions and waste production.” Another student from the same cohort wrote:

I feel that younger generations, as exemplified by Greta Thunberg have a huge role in pushing for change. Having the protests and voicing concerns is so important, as we, the younger generations are going to have to live our lives amongst aspects such as climate change.

While the possibility of making a difference was often discussed by participants as important to them, many felt that they were being held back. Some participants expressed concerns that they were holding themselves back, with personal issues coming to the fore as a key barrier. These issues included “anxieties” (primary), “lack of self-control” (lower secondary), “self-confidence”, “my personal knowledge”, and “mental health” (upper secondary). Expanding on the matter of anxieties and fears, the participants reported on a range of issues and experiences. For example, one primary student discussed fears of “people thinking... I am just trying to show off, and [if] I do achieve they might think that I am not good enough and should just give up”, while a lower secondary student stated that their fear was “being scared of being [their] true self”. An upper secondary student reflected, “I don't feel the need to make large changes beyond what affects me personally/what I see in my everyday life. When a wider issue is involved I feel as though my individual input into changing it would not be enough to make a change so I don't even attempt it.”

Some participants reported that school and education were a barrier. Most of these participants did not offer an explanation about their concerns and simply reported that school, school life, and/or their education were holding them back from making a difference, while the participants who did share further information focused on issues around time and choice. In particular, they reflected on limitations in this regard. One early childhood student stated, “[I] have to be at school too long.” A primary student reflected, “In prep school everything is chosen for you and you can't do what you want”, while a lower secondary student cited “hours of homework” as a barrier. Looking to the upper secondary cohort, there were two students who raised issues around agency, choice, and voice, with one stating, “I do not have an opinion as every time I try to express it, it

gets shut down by the teachers.” The other upper secondary student who provided a reflection discussed expectations and pressures from the school:

It feels like I can't get involved in many peaceful protests or movements in fear of being penalised by the school. On top of this, it doesn't ever feel like there is time to get involved with anything, and [senior high school] is already too stressful enough with trying to get a good ATAR and school commitments.

There were other examples apparent where students raised concerns about pressures at school. Beyond homework and other factors previously discussed, there were a range of academic expectations that were prevalent concerns. While most of these were relevant to the school at which they were enrolled, some participants spoke more broadly about issues in education. For instance, one lower secondary student spoke extensively about issues relating to the education system:

The Australian education system [...] doesn't encourage improvement. Students are locked within standards based on nation-wide assessments, competing just to stay where they are, as opposed to achieving their personal best. Brighter students are rarely challenged within the public education system, stifling their potential. Australia's standards are too low. So many people are being allowed to leave school without the proper requirements to succeed in life, only being able to put their kids into the public education system, continuing the cycle of poor education.

The ways in which adults viewed and/or treated children and young people were flagged as problematic, with participants of all ages raising concerns about not being acknowledged, listened to, or respected. For example, one primary-aged student stated, “The old people think they do everything right.” A lower secondary student voiced that they were seen as lacking in responsibility: “Adults and older people see me and other children as irresponsible and unable to make good decisions.” There were further concerns in this vein; for instance, one upper secondary student shared concerns about respect and status. They felt that children and young people would be best supported, particularly by their teachers, if there were a greater sense of equality and less of a “superiority complex” on part of adults. Often, adults were positioned as gatekeepers – one lower secondary student expressed that it was essential for children and young people to make a difference, but that this was impossible: “There's no way that we can make a difference, thanks to the law and the dinosaurs in the governments of the world.” Other barriers identified related to the affordance of opportunities and the extent to which children and young people are listened to – for example, an upper secondary student reflected:

I feel as though it is our opportunities that are holding us back because we don't get enough of them as kids. Another problem is that people don't listen to kids as much as they do to adults so we kind of get outspoken as well.

Overall, it was apparent that the participants could see the value in active citizenship and possessed a sense of purpose and aspirations in that regard. For some, they perceived or

experienced limitations which were predominantly linked to adults or adult-led systems, such as school and government.

Discussion

These findings indicate a continued need to centre children and young people and their voices and views in dedicated and meaningful ways. In doing so, there is opportunity to be responsive to what the children participating in this study have highlighted: their wish for a greater sense of connectedness and active citizenship.

In reflecting on the perspectives that our participants shared, we wish to pose four key recommendations which are relevant to families, educators, and all other stakeholders in children’s lives. These relate to the realisation of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019, p. 4), which respectively emphasises that young Australians should become ‘confident and creative individuals’, ‘successful lifelong learners’, and ‘active and informed members of the community’. The recommendations we pose are as follows:

1. The voices and views of children and young people should be embedded and illuminated throughout our communities, and as an integral part of our school and community cultures.
2. Play, playfulness, and play-based learning should be understood, honoured, and embraced within educational, family, and community contexts.
3. Resources and opportunities for children should be made visible throughout the contexts in which they are engaged – these may include, for example, resources pertaining to mental health and wellbeing, or opportunities relating to community participation.
4. There should be ongoing support for children and young people relating to their connectedness with their community, including sustained efforts to facilitate their active participation in enacting change.

Essentially, the overarching goal is for families, schools, and more broadly, the wider community to work towards enacting best practice in including children and young people in as many ways as possible. One such way to pursue this practically and meaningfully is to engage children and young people in an advisory capacity; for example, by creating child and youth advisory committees. This is of relevance and value to schools and other organisations, particularly those who are responsible for decision-making that influences or impacts the lives of children and young people. Another potential initiative is to regularly invite participation, presence, and voice from children and young people in relevant initiatives. This type of work requires a reflective stance and a commitment to consultative work, wherein children and young people continue to be engaged in providing formative expertise. For example, in creating an advisory committee, children and young people should have a voice from the outset and throughout the life cycle of such a project, with sustained opportunity to shape the experience in a way that reflects their needs, identities, and priorities. A further example is to consider the use of a child

impact assessment tool (CCYP WA, 2020; Valuing Children Initiative, 2023). Such a tool comprises key questions and/or provocations for all organisations, groups, or individuals to consider the impact of decision making on children. Child impact tools are relevant to all areas of society and integral to our pursuit of better centring and valuing children.

There is a continued need to consider the voices of children and young people at all levels and regarding all matters affecting their lives. Key examples include seeking consultation regarding community initiatives, such as the design of playspaces (e.g. Young et al., 2023). Across these types of initiatives, it is imperative that adults maintain mindfulness towards how they communicate with children (e.g. Church & Bateman, 2022). With regard to research, there is opportunity to focus on children's lived experiences (e.g. Rogoff, Dahl & Callanan, 2018), to pursue more ethical and participatory methods (e.g. Dobson, 2021) and to empower children as active researchers (e.g. Alias et al, 2023; Green, 2016; Kellett, 2010) which hinges on an appreciation of children as "competent practitioners of their social worlds" (Danby & Farrell, 2004, p. 36). This is especially applicable with regard to understanding their perspectives on their participation in and contributions to research (e.g. Alias et al., 2023) and pursuing empowering approaches; for example, giving them agency and choice in what data they generate (e.g. Bertagnoni & Galheigo, 2021; Caoila et al., 2023; Chambers, 2018; Jones, 2022), or by considering methodologies wherein children are positioned as active and/or expert contributors.

Participatory photo elicitation is one example – also known as 'photo-talk', this method combines participant-generated photographs and reflective conversations where the images are collaboratively explored between the participant(s) and the researcher(s) (Cosgriff, 2023). Another example is co-design, wherein children are empowered to collaborate and contribute, often with an emphasis on eliciting their perspectives and ideas, and integrating these into the design process (e.g. Knowles et al., 2022; Romero-Ternerero et al., 2022). This is particularly important when seeking to understand issues that matter to children and to their lives, both presently and into the future, such as the climate crisis. For example, co-design has been utilised around children's nature affinity, where it was evident that the method promoted child participation and voice (Vella et al., 2021). There is also need for continued reflection about the presence of adults in research about children's lives, such as their parents, with a mindfulness towards issues of relationality, interdependence, and power dynamics (Wiedenman et al., 2023).

With the empowerment of children in research in mind, there are limitations to address regarding the present study. This study focused on a single site when recruiting participants; that being a K to 12 college in a metropolitan area. For future project phases, recruitment would encompass a wider range of settings, such as recruiting through schools (or other community organisations) in rural and remote areas to seek a broader range of perspectives from children and young people. In terms of the survey tool, the questions did not explicitly explore specific items or issues pertaining to the participants' wellbeing and sense of belonging – a more comprehensive and targeted approach could involve the identification of issues that are potentially impacting participants, including the cost-of-living crisis, housing uncertainty, domestic/intimate partner violence, international conflicts, or the climate crisis. On this note, future research could engage more

comprehensively with children and young people’s visions for their own lives and visions for their communities – locally, nationally, and globally. Research of this nature has the potential to generate rich data and insights regarding the visions of citizenship and society that children and young people possess. Furthermore, more qualitative inquiry has been identified as a priority for future project phases – for example, interviews and arts-based methods, or methods where the children can participate in co-construction of the research – which will build towards deeper, richer expressions of the participants’ voices and views. More broadly, the researchers recommend a continued commitment to researching with children and young people in such a way that their perspectives and experiences are centred and brought to the fore.

Conclusion

This study sought to elicit the voices of children and young people regarding their experiences of childhood, schooling, family, and community by engaging them in a survey. The data reflected that the participants were keen to engage actively and meaningfully in their communities, but that they often felt limited or restrained in this regard. A key contribution of this study is to further reinforce that children and young people deserve a meaningful sense of place – whether at school, at home, or out in the community. In particular, the data spoke to the value in centring children and young people’s voices in research, and to their wish to be more centred in other contexts.

There was a clear call for adults to listen to children and young people more, and to better support them to become active and contributing community members who care about making a difference. This is a pivotal message which is worthy of consideration across contexts. In committing to including children and young people in sustained, purposeful, and tangible ways, where their voices and views are taken seriously, we can endeavour to reshape our community contexts to better care for, support, and empower all citizens.

References

- ACYP (Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW)) (2022). *The voices of children and young people in out-of-home care 2021*. <https://apo.org.au/node/318895>
- Alias, A., Mohamad Nasri, N. & Awang, M. M. (2023). From active participant to active researcher: What do young people understand about research? *Children*, 10(6), article 1066. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children10061066>
- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2023). *Estimated homelessness: Census 2021*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>
- ACECQA (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority) (2023). *Guide to the National Quality Framework*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/Guide-to-the-NQF-March-2023.pdf>

- Bertagnoni, L. & Galheigo, S. (2021). Photos, narratives, and impressions about the city of children living in the periphery of São Paulo. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional [Brazilian Journal of Occupational Therapy]*, 29, article e2803.
<https://www.scielo.br/j/cadbto/a/jm7NQgQ7GTX6Gpd3KG6xfyk/?lang=en&format=pdf>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Terry, G. & Hayfield, N. (2018). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health & social sciences* (pp. 843-860). Springer. https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_103
- Caoila, V., Cusumano, E., Motta, M., Piro, L., Gelsomini, M., Morra, D., Rizvi, M. & Matera, M. (2023). Designing integrated physical–digital systems for children–nature interaction. *International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction*, 36, article 100582.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijcci.2023.100582>
- CCYP WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia) (2020). *Child impact assessment guidelines*. <https://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/media/4338/ccyp-child-impact-assessment-g-web-enabled-file-june-2020.pdf>
- CCYP WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia) (2021). *Speaking out survey 2021*. <https://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/speaking-out-survey/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). *Adverse childhood experiences*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/>
- Chambers, W. L. (2018). “Colors and kindness”: Nature photography as a means to support academic skill development of elementary students at risk. *National Youth at Risk Journal*, 3(1), 49-65. <http://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2018.030106>
- Church, A. & Batemen, A. (2022). *Talking with children: A handbook of interaction in early childhood education*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108979764>
- Cosgriff, M. (2023). Tuning in: Using photo-talk approaches to explore young people’s everyday relations with local beaches. *Sport, Education & Society*, 28(6), 629-640.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2023.2170345>
- Danby, S. & Farrell, A. (2004). Accounting for young children’s competence in educational research: New perspectives on research ethics. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 31, 35-49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03249527>
- Dobson, M. (2020). Engaging in ethical research partnerships with children and families. In L. Green, D. Holloway, K. Stevenson, T. Leaver & L. Haddon (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital media and children* (pp. 28-37). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351004107>
- Early Years Learning Framework (2022). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia V2.0*. Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf>

- Education Council. (2019). *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. Department of Education, Skills and Employment. <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>
- Family Law Council of Australia. (1996). Involving and representing children in family law. <https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/publications/involving-and-representing-children-family-law>
- Green, C. (2016). Sensory tours as a method for engaging children as active researchers: Exploring the use of wearable cameras in early childhood research. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 48(3), 277-294. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-016-0173-1>
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M. & Namey, E. E. (2014). *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436>
- Jones, L. (2022). The nature photography project: A creative approach to the climate and ecological emergencies. *Intervention*, 20(1), 123-127. http://doi.org/10.4103/intv.intv_28_21
- Kellett, M. (2010). Small shoes, big steps! Empowering children as active researchers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1-2), 195-203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9324-y>
- Knowles, S., Sharma, V., Fortune, S., Wadman, R., Churchill, R. & Hetrick, S. (2022). Adapting a codesign process with young people to prioritize outcomes for a systematic review of interventions to prevent self-harm and suicide. *Health Expectations*, 25(4), 1393-1404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13479>
- Mathews, B. (2023). Australian Child Maltreatment Study: National prevalence and associated health outcomes of child abuse and neglect. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 218(6), 3-4. https://www.mja.com.au/system/files/2023-03/MJA2_v218_is6_Iss2Press_Text.pdf
- Merrick, M. T., Ports, K. A., Ford, D. C., Afifi, T. O., Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2017). Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 69, 10-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.016>
- Mulraney, M., Lee, C., Freed, G., Sawyer, M., Coghill, D., Sciberras, E., Efron, D. & Hiscock, H. (2020). How long and how much? Wait times and costs for initial private child mental health appointments. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 57(4), 526-532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.15253>
- Nelson, C., Bhutta, Z., Burke Harris, N., Danese, A. & Samara, M. (2020). Adversity in childhood is linked to mental and physical health throughout life. *BMJ*, 371:m3048. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3048>
- NSW Government. (2021). *Our Disability Inclusion Action Plan (2021-2025): Trauma-informed practice for NSW Department of Education staff*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/our-disability-inclusion-action-plan-2021-2025/projects/trauma-awareness-training>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2017). Students' sense of belonging at school and their relations with teachers. *PISA 2015 results (Volume III)*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-11-en>

- O'Reilly, M. & Lester, J. N. (2022). Mental health and wellbeing. In A. Church & A. Batemen (Eds.), *Talking with children: A handbook of interaction in early childhood education*. (pp 331-351). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108979764>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation & research methods* (2nd ed.) SAGE. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/qualitative-research-evaluation-methods/book232962>
- Pendlebury, K. (2016). Mental recreation in Wonderland. *American Journal of Play*, 9(1), 41-55. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1123855.pdf>
- Rogoff, B., Dahl, A. & Callanan, M. (2018). The importance of understanding children's lived experience. *Developmental Review*, 50, 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2018.05.006>
- Romero-Tertero, M. C., García-Robles, R., Cagigas-Muñiz, D., Rivera-Romero, O. & Romero-Tertero, M. J. (2022). Participant observation to apply an empirical method of codesign with children. *Advances in Human-Computer Interaction*, 2022, article 1101847. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/1101847>
- Sansawal, S. (2014). Pretend play enhances creativity and imagination. *Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 3(1), 70-83. <https://www.theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/view/340>
- Schwab, K. (2021). *Young people hold the key to creating a better future*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/08/young-people-hold-the-key-to-creating-a-better-future/>
- Scott, C., Nolan, A. & Kilderry, A. (2020). Facilitating children's agency in early childhood education and care. In A. Kilderry & B. Raban (Eds.), *Strong foundations: Evidence informing practice in early childhood education and care* (pp. 124-135). ACER Press. https://doi.org/10.37517/978-1-74286-555-3_9
- Solis, S. L., Curtis, K. N. & Hayes-Messinger, A. (2017). Children's exploration of physical phenomena during object play. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(1), 122-140. <http://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1244583>
- Steiner, R. J., Sheremenko, G., Lesesne, C., Dittus, P. J., Sieving, R. E. & Ethier, K. A. (2019). Adolescent connectedness and adult health outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 144(1), article e20183766. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3766>
- Tasmanian Government (2021). *Launched - 'It takes a Tasmanian village', Child and youth wellbeing strategy*. <https://wellbeing.tas.gov.au/tasmanias-child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy-0-25-year-olds-it-takes-tasmanian-village-launched>
- United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>
- Valuing Children Initiative (2023). *Child and youth impact assessment tool*. <https://valuingchildreninitiative.com.au/child-and-youth-impact-assessment-tool/>
- Vella, K., Dema, T., Soro, A. & Brereton, M. (2021). Fostering children's stewardship of local nature through game co-design. In *OzCHI '21: Proceedings of the 33rd Australian Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 38-50. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3520495.3522702>
- Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (2021). Welsh Government. <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-10/well-being-future-generations-wales-act-2015-the-essentials-2021.pdf>

- Wiedenman, E., Lee, K. M. N. & Hunleth, J. (2023). The adult in the room: The push and pull of parental involvement in research with children. *Childhood*, 30(3), 317-333.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682231176899>
- World Economic Forum (2021). *Davos Lab: Youth Recovery Plan: Insight Report*.
https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Davos_Lab_Youth_Recovery_Plan_2021.pdf
- Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsch-Pasek, K., Michnick Golinkoff, R., Baum, R., Gambon, T., Lavin, A., Mattson, G., Wissow, L., Hill, D. L., Ameenuddin, N., Reid Chassiakos, Y., Cross, C., Boyd, R., Mendelson, R., Moreno, M. A., Radesky, J., Swanson, W. S., Smith, J. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), article e20182058.
<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>
- Young, S., Church, A., Maskiell, A., Raisbeck, P. & Eadie, T. (2023). Design considerations in the activation of a temporary playspace for children and families: Perspectives of council, architects and designers. *Australian Planner*, online first.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2023.2219789>

Appendix 1: Survey questions

1. What grade/year level are you enrolled in?
2. Can you list three (3) things that you value most in your day-to-day life?
3. Can you list three (3) things that you value most at school?
4. Order the following from most important to least important. You can click and drag the items into their order of importance.
 - _____ My family
 - _____ My friendships
 - _____ My school and my learning
 - _____ Creativity, art, and design
 - _____ Devices (e.g. your smart phone, gaming device, etc.)
 - _____ Social media (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook)
 - _____ Websites and apps (e.g. YouTube, Netflix)
 - _____ Entertainment (e.g. movies, TV shows, concerts)
 - _____ Sports, recreation, and fitness
 - _____ Our environment and sustainability
 - _____ Feeling happy, safe, and well
 - _____ Helping others and making a difference
5. Do you feel valued?
6. How valued do you feel at home / at school / in the community?
7. How important is it to you to feel valued?
8. What sort of things make you feel valued? Share some examples of ways that people can make you feel important and meaningful.
9. Do you feel it is important for children and young people to make a difference?
10. How do you feel children and young people can make a difference?
11. Do you feel like anything is holding you back from making a difference?
12. How can adults support you so that you can make a difference?
13. What do you feel is holding you back from making a difference?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about this topic?

Dr Madeleine Rose Dobson is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Care at the School of Education, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. Her research focuses on children's rights and social justice. Madeleine's recent projects have focused on the representation of children on social media, caring and trauma-informed pedagogies, and children's connectedness to natural environments.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7615-6974>

Email: madeleine.dobson@curtin.edu.au

Dr Victoria Absalom-Hornby has spent 20 years in the UK and Australia enhancing outcomes for children and young people, including clinical roles and various taskforces and steering committees. Victoria continues to work across research and advocacy at the Valuing Children Initiative based in Perth, Western Australia [<https://valuingchildreninitiative.com.au/>], to ensure children have a voice in an adult-led world.

Email: vabsalom-hornby@valuingchildren.com.au

Elizabeth Baca is part of the Gender Research Network at Curtin University, bringing gender researchers together from a broad range of fields of study. Elizabeth's previous research has covered children's rights, social justice, experiences of sexual violence in Australia, and caring communities.

Email: elizabeth.baca@curtin.edu.au

Please cite as: Dobson, M. R., Absalom-Hornby, V. & Baca, E. (2023). "Be beside me": Exploring children and young people's visions for belonging and citizenship. *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(4), 1362-1379. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/dobson.pdf>