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## Our Neighbourhood as a Learning Community

The neighbourhood of an early childhood teacher is interwoven and has many facets, but within this neighbourhood there is a wealth of knowledge and experiences waiting to be discovered. There are many learning communities within our neighbourhood – the community of parents and families; the community of children; the community of neighbours, small businesses and services and also the community of professionals. Early childhood educators intersect all these communities and are a pivotal point in developing a web of knowledge and learning that links them all. But how do the neighbourhood and the community foster and develop learning?

In order to answer this we first need to explore the concept of a learning community. The concept of a learning community is one of collaborative learning. Within a learning community participants construct knowledge by working together, not just cooperatively but interdependently.<sup>1</sup> Learning communities not only facilitate the sharing of knowledge, but also have the potential to create new knowledge that can be used for the benefit of the community as a whole and/or its individual members.<sup>2</sup>

Learning communities are about a sharing of knowledge based on common interests, from which we can learn and develop new understanding and enhance practice. Within our professional practice we have the capacity to build a learning community through the way we invite others to participate. Within our community we have a wealth of knowledge about young children, society, diversity, education which is held by parents, grandparents, neighbourhood and schools but we often don't always tap into this knowledge base or utilise the available expertise effectively.

Early childhood services are a central focus in a learning community brought together with the shared interests of understanding and supporting young children in their development and education. The universality of the services, the informal structures and the nature of accessibility provide a venue for families and professionals to meet and share ideas, experiences, strategies and approaches with each other and learn from each other. The early childhood teacher has the opportunity within this setting to support and promote an environment that encourages shared learning.

It is the early childhood teacher who, because of the nature of their role, can draw together the knowledge and ideas from across the community. The early childhood service, be it a stand alone preschool or an integrated setting, is a venue that promotes a broad sense of community. Many life long friendships and support systems are developed during the early childhood years through congregations of families and professionals coming together to share common interests and issues around children and parenting. The preschool fete, the working bee, establishing a

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<sup>1</sup> Cross, K.P (1998) *Why Learning Communities? Why Now?* in *About Campus* July/August 1998 p4

<sup>2</sup> Kilpatrick, S. Barrett, M. & Jones, T (2003) *Defining Learning Communities* Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania (Aust) found online at: <http://www.aare.edu.au/03pap/jon03441.pdf>

siblings playgroup, inviting the local primary school to visit are all opportunities to for families engage with the broader community and develop a culture of sharing and learning from each other. The kindergarten teacher can take a pivotal role in facilitating families' engagement with the community and of building capability within the individual participants. It is this capability building that leads to strong learning communities that value and share the knowledge gained through life experiences.

The early childhood teacher needs to create opportunities for parents to share ideas and experiences with each other, with you as the teacher, and with other members of the learning community. Through fostering an environment where individuals feel welcome to come together and share experiences and across and within their community parents, families and the broader community will begin to engage in the communal sharing of knowledge and ideas that foster a sense of worth and belonging. The opportunities created need to capture the informality that exists within communities and can be avenues for supporting new and marginalised members to feel comfortable and acknowledging that participants will come and go as circumstances change.

Early childhood teachers can learn much from the families and community in which they work. Within the community there is a wealth of life experiences that have been gained by parents and families. Families should be encouraged to share their stories as a means to inform learning and gain knowledge across the community. Encouraging parents to share their own life experiences demonstrates to them that they are valued and that their knowledge is not only relevant but also important for others to learn from. This encouragement to share life experiences reflects to parents the importance of their role in their child's learning. One of the most valuable ways to really understand the child in your care is through reflection of the impact and influence culture, early life experiences and family have had on the person you see today? Parents are the most significant purveyors of knowledge about their child. Teachers need to seek this knowledge and recognise parents as equal partners in the design and development of their preschool program. Parents are rarely invited by teachers to discuss the specific learning goals and contribute to the individual planning undertaken by teachers yet have a very clear focus

Understanding and engaging the broader community in which we work is also critical to develop a sense of citizenship with the children we teach. Children need to develop the skills, knowledge and behaviours that enable them to become confident members of society. Children exist with in a social group and through engaging with the broader community they can develop a sense of belonging to a social group and learn about respect and concern for others. Inviting community members to participate in your program and sharing their skills and experiences will support children to gain a broad understanding of who makes a community. By incorporating into your program visits to the elderly citizens centre, the library, or the police station you provide children with an understanding of what it means to live within a community. Working in partnership with the local school in sharing

resources, inviting children to visit or taking your group to see a performance of the school play, helps contextualise for children the kindergarten environment with which they are familiar, with the broader community in which they belong.

Within a professional learning community early childhood teachers have the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise and to build their own practice by learning from other professionals across the sector. The professional learning community brings together early childhood teachers, teachers working in school settings, early childhood workers, maternal and child health nurses and a range of other professionals, who have a range expertise and knowledge on young children and families, but can bring a different dimension the professional knowledge and expertise of an early childhood teacher. The opportunity to learn from and exchange knowledge and resources across these professions, and to integrate practice that comes from outside their own perspective, can lead to the early childhood teacher developing a strong knowledge base that can enhance their own professional standing and professional practice. Professionals from a range of services and programs should be embraced and engaged, as they provide the early childhood teacher with alternate frameworks on families, children and learning from which to draw and develop a more holistic model of teaching. The opportunities for early childhood teachers to participate in professional networks should be encouraged and supported as a critical component of the professional development process. A key reform identified by the Victorian State Government in the recent discussion paper on education<sup>3</sup> advocates for the development of strong local networks that draw on the expertise of early childhood services which can develop local solutions to shared problems. It is from these professional learning communities and networks that early childhood teachers can gain practical strategies to support their practice and integrate the knowledge gained and shared by others into their own teaching philosophy.

Learning Communities exist and evolve because they draw together groups of individuals who have common interests and a shared approach to learning from each other. For the early childhood teacher the challenge is in realising the value the learning community presents to supporting their professional practice and expertise. It is in a community where parents, teachers and professionals are working in harmony that positive learning outcomes are achieved.

Liz Rouse  
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<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) Blue print for early childhood development and school reform: Early Childhood Discussion Paper Victorian State Government

**References**

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