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**"Learning Communities' Contribution to Educational Improvement:  
Joint Participation for Mutual Gain in Early Childhood Education"**

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## LEARNING COMMUNITIES' CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT: JOINT PARTICIPATION FOR MUTUAL GAIN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### Abstract

Linking the learning of pre-service teachers with meaningful, real life experiences in the field of teaching is highly valued by school practitioners and university lecturers alike. This year the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania has focussed on becoming a Learning Community that extends learning beyond the Faculty to wider fields of education. As part of this focus, a joint project between the Faculty of Education and the Tasmanian Department of Education has been undertaken. This Project sets out to link early childhood departmental support officers, kindergarten teachers and undergraduate fourth year early childhood students in a collaborative initiative to design and publish support materials for the *Revised Kindergarten Development Check* (2003), whilst supporting the theoretical stance of the recently published *Essential Learnings Framework* (2002; 2003) curriculum documents. The supportive nature of this project allowed classroom practitioners to act as mentors for the fourth year students as they undertook the development of support materials. Indeed, the authentic nature of the students' learning ensured their ongoing commitment to the project, although some students experienced initial feelings of apprehension as they realised the level of professional responsibility involved. The benefits from this project were significant for all participants, with the greatest gains being apparent in the areas of consultation, collaboration and professional interchange between two key Tasmanian educational learning communities.

### Introduction

In Tasmania over the past three years, stronger professional links between the university and the state education department have been proposed and enunciated within key planning documents from both centres. Indeed, in the Department of Education's *Learning Together* document (2000, p.4) it is clearly stated that "strengthened pathways and bridges between different forms of education, training and work" are to be supported and facilitated. Specific reference is made to "working with universities to ensure beginning teachers are well prepared for their profession" being central to ensuring quality teaching within the education department (p.15). The University of Tasmania's Faculty of Education Strategic Plan (2003) presents a similar agenda, where the establishment of learning communities across diverse sectors of education are to be actively fostered, and seen to be 'working alliances' between key educational parties.

Supporting this collaborative approach of joint educational endeavour, a project was undertaken comprising personnel from the Tasmanian Office of Educational Review, kindergarten classroom

practitioners, early year's support staff and fourth year early childhood students within the Bachelor of Education program. In consultation with experienced kindergarten teachers and support staff, the student teachers were engaged in the design and production of support materials for the *Revised Kindergarten Development Check* (2003), (which is undertaken with every kindergarten child in Tasmanian state schools by their classroom teacher in the areas of personal and social behaviour; listening, speaking and understanding; gross and fine motor skills; and cognitive development at the commencement of the child's year in kindergarten). During the Project the student teachers were engaged in professional conversations with classroom teachers to gain feedback on the suitability of their planned activities/strategies for differing items on the *Revised Kindergarten Development Check*.

The participatory approach undertaken is based upon Wenger's (1998) concept of a 'community of practice', where teaching expertise does not lie solely with the more experienced teachers, but rather is a process allowing all members of a community to contribute to the development of teaching practices. This form of professional participation is "...a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person" (Wenger, 1998). In his writing about participation, Wenger (1998, pp. 56-57) highlights three crucial aspects.

- Participation is not "tantamount to collaboration. It can involve all kinds of relations, conflictual as well as harmonious, ..., competitive as well as cooperative".
- Participation in "social communities shapes our experience, and it also shapes those communities; the transformative potential goes both ways". He goes on to add that being able to "shape the practice of our communities is an important aspect of our experience of participation".
- Participation is "broader than mere engagement in practice" as it goes "beyond direct engagement in specific activities with specific people" to become part of one's being in other communities. (pp. 56-57)

In designing this Project, the participatory process undertaken was seen to accentuate "the connectedness among teachers at differing career stages", allowing beginning and experienced teachers to "communicate ideas and work on real problems, (and) put their collective knowledge base into action" (Weiss, 1999, p.2). Furthermore, the process undertaken was not designed to have expert teachers advising novice teachers through professional conversations, but rather was a joint venture where both students and experienced teachers were able to learn together with their conversations enabling participants to recognise in each other something of themselves (Wenger, 1998). It was also acknowledged that these professional conversations would allow the students to "develop their understandings of practice and learn something that can impact upon their practice"

(Edwards & Collison, 1996, pp. 47- 48), in relation to the suitability of the resource materials for use in kindergarten settings. It was also anticipated that students would benefit from these conversational opportunities, allowing them to confirm, modify or radically change their views on their proposed activities (Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth and Dobbins, 1998), based upon knowledgeable information from experienced classroom practitioners. However, advice from Edwards and Collison (1996, pp. 49) was noted regarding teacher/mentors needing to be “good listeners” and to take “seriously students’ concerns... giving clearly focussed responses that started with the students’ perspectives”. The Project organisers set out to enable participants, through professional conversations to discuss common issues in a shared, supportive context of joint endeavour.

The Project organisers were aware that “most teachers learn best from other teachers (therefore) programs that help to share ideas and practices ... are most likely to succeed and must be promoted” (Department of Education, 2000, p.15). The opportunity for the student teachers to be engaged in a learning opportunity, which valued their competence in designing and producing quality resources for use in Tasmanian kindergartens classrooms over Term 2, 2003, as part of the project’s moderation process, was seen to be of key importance. However, as this Project was a new venture between two differing learning communities, the Department of Education and Faculty of Education, it was seen as crucial to investigate the dynamics of the participation achieved throughout the process. It was not appropriate to just acknowledge the success, or lack thereof, of varying aspects of the Project. Rather, it was essential that a clear understanding of the nature of the participation be explored and examined. Thus the aspect of the Project reported in this paper aimed to:

- investigate the nature of student teachers’ and classroom practitioners’ participation in the Project and to explore the participatory aspects perceived to facilitate or impair the success of such collegial endeavours across the two education sectors.

### **Method/Approach**

The six week long Project was designed as a case study to investigate the nature of the participatory processes undertaken in the design and production of support materials for the *Revised Kindergarten Check* (2003), involving fourth year Bachelor of Education student teachers (n=75) and kindergarten and early years practitioners and support personnel (n=7). A case study approach was utilised to allow the investigation to “retain its holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events” and to focus on “process rather than outcome”(Burns, 2000, p.460). Sharing sessions were undertaken in small groups, comprising five or six students and one experienced practitioner, providing a variety of opportunities for professional conversations, related to the development of the support materials.

Teachers rotated between the student groups to allow students to engage in professional conversations involving input from different teachers. In the final week of the Project, the student teachers presented their completed resources to the classroom practitioners for phase one of the moderation process, prior to the resources being sent to state schools around Tasmania for trial use in kindergarten classrooms. The technique used for data collection during the Project was written documentation, comprising two sets of structured journal entries, one in week 4 and one at the end of week 6 of the Project. These journals were designed to capture participants' perceptions of the procedures and processes undertaken over the duration of the six week project.

The open-ended statements obtained from the written documentation provided qualitative data which were analysed in a systematic manner, with the collected data being classified into themes, issues, and concepts (Burns, 2000). A constant comparative method of analysis was employed, where one segment of data was compared to others to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 1998). The codes developed were from the writings of Wenger (1998, p.55), who contends that participation involves "active involvement in social enterprises" which involves both personal and social aspects. The participatory aspects of doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging (Wenger, 1998) were used as codes to enable deeper analysis of the data gained. It was found that respondents referred to aspects including personal feelings (Feeling), interpersonal relationships (Belonging), shared ways of thinking and understanding (Talking and Thinking) and implication for action (Doing) during the duration of the Project. Throughout the coding process, it was apparent that a number of responses reflected more than one category and conceptual links between the categories and the items was clearly evident (Merriam, 1998).

### **Reporting on the findings of the Project**

Information gathered from the two sets of written documentation (supplied by classroom practitioners and student teachers) were analysed and are presented below. Responses from the student teachers and classroom practitioners indicate that the participative nature of the Project caused respondents, especially students, to feel emotionally and personally involved, with evidence of the range of emotions experienced including, pride, doubt, and excitement. Some students expressed initial unease at the level of responsibility being placed upon them. Opportunities to share and talk were highly valued by participants with the need to contribute, explain, validate, question and clarify being central to their responses. However, some students were concerned that they needed a longer period of time for sharing with the teachers. Respondents also cited various factors related to Thinking. Here respondents reported the value of developing a greater awareness and understanding of the curriculum

documents used within the Department of Education. They also valued listening to others' ideas (both students and teachers), and having an opportunity to receive, consider and then act upon feedback. The category of Belonging was frequently referred to with involvement in a meaningful collaborative project with professional colleagues being seen as a significant advantage by both groups. The completion of resources for the Project was captured by the Doing category, where respondents noted the practical nature and quality of the resources, whilst others referred to the time demands involved.

Table 1 – Examples of student teachers' and classroom practitioners' perceptions of the Project

	<b>REFLECTING ON THE PROJECT</b>
<b>Feelings</b>	Initial self-doubt; daunted by project (S;T)
	Challenged with the project (S)
	Teachers already have the knowledge; we are only students (S)
	Sharing helped to make students feel more relaxed about the project; more confident with proposed activities (S)
	More relaxed and reassured as project proceeded (S)
	Initial uncertainty concerning expectations (S)
	Pride in own activities (S)
	Excited that our ideas will be beneficial in future kindergarten programs (S)
<b>Doing</b>	Involved lots of work (S)
	Practical nature of the project; with the benefit of making resources for use in real classrooms (S;T)
	The quality and variety of the resources produced (S; T)
	Being able to enhance the resources after consulting with others. (S)
<b>Talking</b>	Value in talking to peers/teachers; presenting own ideas to others; needing to validate own responses (S; T)
	Having the time to talk to classroom practitioners about proposed activities (S; T)
	Good to gain a variety of opinions from classroom practitioners (S)
	Provided opportunities for students to question, clarify and contribute (S;T)
	Beneficial to have a variety of opinions from classroom practitioners (S)
	More time for talking was needed; all groups should have had access to all teachers. (S)
<b>Belonging</b>	Good collaborative initiative working on a real project (S; T)
	Meeting with teachers /students for a common purpose (S; T)
	Preparing students for future career (S; T)
<b>Thinking</b>	Developing greater understanding of curriculum documents (S; T)
	Gaining feedback; reaffirming ideas; challenging opinions; clarify effectiveness and relevance of proposed activities (S; T)
	Listening to others and applying to own practice; everyone gained ideas (S;T)
	The opportunity to gain another perspective on the application of Kindergarten Check in the classroom (S)

**Key:** S = student responses; T = Teacher/practitioner responses

## Discussion

The study's aims were designed to investigate the nature of differing aspects associated with student teachers' and classroom practitioners' participation in the Project. Discussion of the Project's findings is undertaken using Wenger's (1998) three assessments of participation within professional communities.

These are that participation is not tantamount to collaboration, participation shapes personal experience and communities, and participation goes beyond the task at hand to be applied to other communities in which people have membership. Each of these aspects will now be discussed.

### **Participation is not tantamount to collaboration**

Professional participation, according to Wenger (1998) must not be assumed to be collaborative, as it can involve all kinds of relations, including conflicting and cordial, as well as competitive and cooperative interactions. The fourth year Bachelor of Education early childhood students and classroom practitioners from the Department of Education demonstrated (and expressed in their feedback) many examples of the personal and emotional aspects which can arise in group participation. Many participants cited experiencing feelings of varying types, including self-doubt, being challenged, and excitement. A variety of comments were received in this area and the following capture the essence of those presented early in the Project. *'I initially thought teachers should be developing these activities, as they have the experience and we don't', and 'I thought heavens I'll never be able to do this!' and 'I felt excited and that it was a great idea, but it was also daunting'.*

However, as the Project preceded, and following discussions with others during the professional conversations, some early impressions were revised, as reflected in the following. *'I feel a little easier about what activities to do after talking with the practising teachers and being reassured that I am on the right track' and 'Sharing debunked some of the perceptions I had about the value of the Kindergarten Check in the classroom'.* Many students observed that good aspects about sharing with others, both peers and classroom teachers, included the *'ideas'* and *'collaboration'* arising from conversations. *'Hearing others put forward their thoughts and fears helps deal with your own'* commented one student. Edwards and Collison (1996, p. 49) support this argument as they believe that creating a "conversational climate" that encourages students to "reveal their own anxieties" is essential in professional mentoring-type conversations. Another student stated *'I felt a little daunted by sharing things that I am excited about with teachers who have been doing the same thing for years',* whilst a further student noted that tolerance was needed as it was important to *'listen to, and accept opinions that you normally wouldn't accept',* and *'it was beneficial to realise that everyone had an individual and personal slant to contribute towards the discussions'.* A classroom practitioner noted that *'I realised that I had a lot to offer students – ideas 'sprang to mind' naturally – confirming my belief in my practice',* and another *'it was a cordial time for all'.* It was seen as important that students received "clearly focussed responses" that started with their own perspective, a state which is cited as being a condition of successful teacher/mentoring (Edwards and Collison, 1996).

Observations completed during the sharing session confirmed that some students found it difficult to receive constructive criticism, evidenced by their frowns and defensive body language. Conversely, other students were open to advice, and were actively questioning and seeking this type of feedback, as evidenced in the following student's comment *'it enabled me to see another person's view in a critical light'*. Another stated *'it was good to be asked probing questions to initiate more detailed thought concerning what I meant and how I was going to develop my resources'*. This finding confirms the thoughts of Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth and Dobbins, (1998) who contend that conversational opportunities allow students to think, confirm, modify or change altogether their views on their proposed activities.

Reflective comments received over the duration of the Project, related to Thinking, which is one of Wenger's key signs of participation. As one student stated *'sharing helped me to think "outside the square" – I was challenged'*, whilst another remarked *'It pointed out things that I hadn't thought of myself – that is - things that would improve my activity – things that wouldn't work for example'*. One classroom practitioner noted that *'to be involved challenged my thinking, extended my repertoire of strategies and made me reflect on my own practice'*. Huling and Resta (2001, p. 2) support this teacher's reflection and state that when practising teachers are involved in mentoring opportunities they come to "critically examine their own practice". Groundwater-Smith, Ewing and Le Cornu (2003, p.170) also confirm the importance of "engaging in dialogue with a peer," which becomes "an impetus for powerful reflection".

An area of concern for most student participants was the length of time allowed for sharing with others. Many felt that more time needed to be made available, as one student pointed out *'we only got to talk to one practitioner, as she took our ideas and expanded upon them'*, whilst another student stated it would have been good if *'the teachers were rotating more so that we got more ideas'*. These are valid comments and more formal processes for sharing between the student and teacher groups would have been beneficial. Furthermore, a few students felt that the time for professional conversations had been shared in an inequitable manner, as evidenced in comments such as *'more time needed to be provided as some activities had more time spent on them than others'*, and *'I really didn't feel I got enough feedback'*. However, overall the reaffirming nature of the conversations was seen as significant by many of the students as captured in comments such as *'I now feel more comfortable about what I'm doing and that I'm thinking similarly to classroom teachers'*, and *'the feedback conversations were invaluable and settled our nerves about our ideas not being legitimate or worthwhile'*, and *'it gave me confidence to go ahead with my activities'*. Only one student expressed concern, stating *'I'm still*

*confused about what is expected'* after the sharing time between the students and teachers. Wenger's suggestion that participation is not necessarily tantamount to collaboration was not the case in the endeavour, with relationships between the two groups being overwhelmingly harmonious, cooperative and beneficial to all. It is contended that the nature of the participation was indeed collaborative.

### **Participation in social communities shapes our personal experience, and the community in which we are involved**

Wenger's (1998) second argument is that participation is social in nature and in turn shapes each person and the community to which they belong. Evidence of the personal value, and indeed challenge, of the participation can be found in many of the participants' reflections. As one student commented, *'I found it hard at first as different teachers have different views. One teacher might like your idea, whereas another teacher may be able to give you a more critical viewpoint. Then you had to decide yourself what to do.* Another commented *'as students we were treated as if we had something valuable to offer'*. Three classroom practitioners noted *'I was amazed at the development in the students' thinking'*, and *'I feel I have developed a broader understanding by accepting other's views and values'* and *'I have found being involved has challenged my thinking, extended my repertoire of strategies, and made me reflect on my own practice'*. This comment supports a statement made by Ferraro (2000, p.3) who contends that "by gaining a better understanding of their own teaching styles through reflective practice, teachers can improve their effectiveness in the classroom". These reflections clearly capture the personally transforming nature of the professional conversations undertaken by students and teachers alike, and the true value for each participant cannot be effectively assessed within the parameters of this Project.

Benefits for the entire learning community established within the Project group were somewhat less apparent within the comments made by respondents. However, a number of students remarked on the collaborative process involved and the power flowing from having *'the opportunity to work alongside others to plan activities/resources that may become useful in the kinder classroom'*. A classroom practitioner commented that *'this has been fantastic - I saw the immense value of working cooperatively, but the large amount of work was done by the students – more links please'*. Further, when data were analysed into Wenger's five aspects of participation, the area of Belonging featured in some respondents' reflections, including *'I thought it was a good way of becoming part of a future teaching team experiencing working with experienced teachers.'* It is apparent that there were benefits from participation in the Project for both teachers and students, significantly at a personal level, but also to a lesser degree for the learning community they had become.

## **Participation extended from the specific activities with specific people to become part of other communities in which one participates.**

The broader value of participation in this Project was seen to benefit differing communities with which each group of participants was associated. Benefits for the students in their future teaching are captured in the following quotes *'it was a good experience with a lot of work, but it can be used in our future teaching'*, and *'I felt as though we were actually contributing to something which will affect us in the future'* and *'it was a valuable experience that allowed students going into a teaching career an opportunity to test their strategies and ideas with valuable feedback from colleagues already teaching'*. It is indeed significant that this latter student teacher saw the teachers as colleagues. Implications for unit offerings at University were seen as emanating from this Project, with comments from both students and teachers supporting this form of participation. *'There should be more of these professional conversations at Uni. They are so beneficial'*, and *'This sharing should be **compulsory** throughout every semester in the education degree'*. Classroom practitioners also indicated that involvement in the Project had impacted upon their own classroom practice, as captured in the following comment *'not only was I able to provide guidance and direction to some students, but also gained useful insights and ideas that will strengthen my own classroom practice'*.

Wenger's (1998) Doing aspect of participation was reflected in comments related to the production of the final resource packages and the expectancy demonstrated by the participating teachers for using these activities within their own classrooms. This was captured clearly in the statement, *'I can't wait to be involved in using some of these resources in the classroom with my kinder children – I know they will love them!'*. It is evident that not only has the Project been beneficial for the student teachers who developed the resources but also for the classroom practitioners who willingly participated. The impact on the wider school community of kindergarten children and teachers has only just begun and can only develop effectively with similar collaborative effort. As one teacher commented *'I now feel that many educators and children will benefit from experiencing these resources and strategies'*.

## **Conclusion**

Investigating the nature of student teachers' and classroom practitioners' participation in the *Revised Kindergarten Development Check* Project has revealed some interesting findings. The fact that **both** students **and** classroom teachers perceived benefits from participation in the Project was noteworthy. It could be expected that student teachers would find professional conversations with teaching colleagues to be beneficial, however, participating teachers also cited perceived personal and professional gains. In addition, participation in the Project did reach a collaborative stage of engagement for both groups

involved, although it was not without some participants experiencing a range of feelings, including self-doubt, excitement and personal challenge. Time was the area of greatest concern expressed by students, relating to the length of time provided for the professional conversations, with some students also feeling that equality of time with classroom teachers, for them personally, could have been improved. Professional conversations were perceived by participants to be most beneficial, with talking and sharing being highly valued by all. Clear evidence of reflective thinking was observed in participants' reflections, with positive changes in teaching practices being noted by some participants. It is believed that this Project can be seen as the successful commencement of participatory ventures between the Faculty of Education and the Department of Education in Tasmania. One classroom practitioner captures the group's commitment to such endeavours in the following comments '*it is great to be able to be involved in a collaborative project like this – there should be more links between the Uni and the Department*'. This Project would appear to indicate, that the level of success achieved when these two learning communities from differing sectors of education united to participate in a project of mutual interest and benefit, that similar participatory endeavours are worthy of future investigation.

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