

## Chapter 4 - Igniting the magic : Community identity

“It (the research journey) has looked different for all of us, depending on our own passion and strengths, but for myself this journey has allowed me to grow and develop a strong teaching philosophy which I believe in and recognize as ever changing, moving forward.” (Katrina Jones, teacher researcher)

### Introduction

This chapter describes how our Preschool community identity is developed by exploring the practices and routines, tools and artefacts, climate and culture of the centre. It demonstrates the understanding we gained of how individuals and groups within the community are shaped by and in turn shape the identity of the learning community through the practices adopted within the early childhood programme. Teacher practice is instrumental in nurturing a ‘community of learning’ identity.

In this chapter we focus on people’s participation in community processes that form common practice, and how practices evolve and respond to the changing community. We explore the connection between historical cultural practices and emerging new practices as the teaching team undertake a process of re-constructing project work in the curriculum. Prior knowledge and understandings merge with new ones as the teacher researcher team experience change in the community. Our community’s identity undergoes constant evolution, rather than abrupt or radical change: practices of the past continue in some form but do not necessarily remain the same.

### Supporting literature 4.1: Identities as trajectories within social settings

In social learning theory, writers discuss how cultural and historical practices are influential on current and future practices within communities and therefore reshape community identity as well as the people within it.

Wenger (1998) states “The temporal dimension of identity is critical. Not only do we keep negotiating our identities, but they place our engagement in practice in this temporal context. We are always simultaneously dealing with specific situations, participating in the histories of certain practices, and involved in becoming certain persons. As trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present. (p. 155)”

The first section of this chapter explores the impact of change in teacher curriculum practices on community identity. The teacher researcher team reviewed and reflected on centre documentation to develop an understanding of how participation in the community is affected by change in community culture and new curriculum teaching practices. The second section explores the impact of change in community membership on centre practices as the group of over-two teachers’ grapple with re-constructing their collective approach to group project work implementation during a period of staffing changes. The ‘magic’ of the community engaging with and participating together in learning appeared to have been lost and this team wanted to re-ignite

it. A group project story is presented to illustrate how projects became re-established in the programme; however, it does not look exactly the same as before as the basis for group learning through projects shifts from a topic to an inquiry. Changes in teacher practice and learning are described and explained in relation to how participation of children, teachers and parents/whanau influenced the re-construction of practice. The final section of this chapter explores the reasons underpinning the shifts in project work practice. The critical role teacher's hold in a community of learners comes into view. Teachers were able to make effective change by taking notice of the participation of children and parents/whanau rather than focussing on the perceived needs of the teaching team.

### ***Community identity***

The identity of our community could be described simplistically as a place characterised by all parties, teachers, parents/whanau and children, sharing a mutual interest in children's learning and development. Through this research process the teacher researcher team formed a deeper understanding of this community's identity, one that encompasses the interrelationship of people, places and things. Our view of the Preschool's community is underpinned by an understanding that the community consists of a collective group of people who use collaborative processes to make decisions about the community's activities.

#### **Supporting literature 4.2: Defining 'collaborative' and 'collective'.**

To develop understandings about how people in this learning community function as a group we found it necessary to define for ourselves a differentiation between the terms collective and collaborative.

**Collaborative** - Bullough & Gitlin (2001) suggest that 'collaborative' is not a concept with a singular meaning and that it is important to clarify this concept. The understanding that we developed is that 'collaborative' describes the process of participants in the community engaging together in discussion to come to an agreement. It is process for developing shared understandings, a shared vision or shared beliefs. An outcome of collaborative interactions is that it can provide a common frame of understanding within which the people participate.

**Collective** – Mayo (2003) offers an interpretation of 'collective' that captured our understanding:

“Collective refers to multiple perspectives, meanings and viewpoints which might be brought together within an assembly of people, *collective* connotes the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, that no single part carries all of the knowledge or understanding of the group, and that new knowledge is generated, in context, as people work together to learn from each other and to decide what they will agree, where to differ, and how they will act (individually and collectively) as a result.” (p.10)

With this understanding of 'collective' we believe that individuals make up a collective group of participants in the learning community. Each person can act differently however, collaborative decisions influence actions. We use the term collective to denote that it is not about members of the community needing to 'be the same'. The community values 'multiple perspectives, meanings and viewpoints'.

Community identity forms as people relate, participate, make decisions and learn together within an environment that actively values difference and diversity of people within the community. Our

interpretation of an environment extends beyond a physical place to include the culture and spirit of the community. Our notion of empowerment as the spirit of the community as is explored further in chapter 5. The environment we are describing is one that recognises an inter-connectedness between the Preschool and children's homes. The early childhood environment provides space and opportunity for community members to become involved, to participate, to learn and to teach in different ways and at different times. Children's home environments act in similar ways. The identity of our learning community is offered as a connected concept where centre and home come together in an interdependent way in support of children's learning.

As described in chapter 2 the visual imagery used by the research team evolved over time as the team came to understand different elements of the learning community. In chapter 2 the identity of individuals in the community is described as that of both teachers and learners. Within this view individual difference and diversity amongst group members is valued by the community. In chapter 3 the significance of relationships in nurturing participation in the community is revealed. Creating a culture of dialogue to nurture relationships among participants becomes a conscious role of teachers. In this chapter the dual identities of people as teachers and learners, and the relationships among them, are viewed as foundational factors for building a learning community. The following exhibit captures the teacher researchers' image of the identity of this learning community.

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**Exhibit 4.1: Community identity as weaving participation**

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Adults and children belong to this learning community. Participating together creates a complex form of weaving in which individuals move in and out through the layers. The background layer

represents the environment (home and centre as explained above) as the whariki (or culture) where the Principles of Te Whāriki are woven together. The middle layer represents the communication practices that nurture relationships and a culture of dialogue among participants. The layer in the front represents the ways in which individuals become visible through participation in community practices at different times and in different ways. The community practices this research project focussed on were around projects and visual art.

Participation in the learning community needs to be nurtured as it cannot be assumed that it will naturally occur as a result of people coming together. In this early childhood context teachers have the important role of nurturing the participation of others, children and adults. Teacher practice involves making space for this participation. To make the space, teachers work with an understanding of how participants within a community hold differing roles and responsibilities, each contributing towards achieving the common purpose of the group – children’s care and education. Collaboration between participants involves actively seeking out and listening to the opinions and views of others with resulting community actions reflective of the collaboration.

### ***Change in the community***

Change is part of the community’s identity. As this research project progressed, the centre experienced a number of changes. As a consequence of our first action research cycles, teachers had developed new practices to promote parental participation and were also involved in strengthening their own participation in visual art with children. Alongside these changes in curriculum, teachers experienced change in membership of the teaching team. Four new teachers joined the team during the first eighteen months of the project. One of these changes was that of the assistant supervisor. At the beginning of the second eighteen months further change occurred in the infant and toddler’s teaching team. A new teacher was employed and the centre supervisor moved from the over-twos team to the infant and toddlers team. As is common in early childhood centres, there was also a change in children and families attending the centre, when the older children moved on to school.

The impact of change became of interest to the teacher researcher team. While it was not evident during separate action research cycles, it emerged as we began viewing and analyzing the overall research journey. The experiences of teachers and the centre community over the last eighteen months of the project became valuable in developing understandings about issues of change in a learning community.

## **Impact of change in teacher curriculum practice on community participation**

Over the first twelve months of the research project teachers had developed practices to strengthen two-way communication practices among teachers, and teachers and parents/whanau in order to support relationship development and provide pathways for community participation in children's learning. At the same time teacher participation and confidence in visual art had increased as all teachers had been involved in moving visual art to an integrated part of the curriculum. A question for the research team was "so what does this mean for the community?" Historically, project work practices were firmly embedded in the centre curriculum. Project-work practices had established a culture in the community, one in which parents, children and teachers held expectations for engaging together in explorations and learning. The research team was interested in finding out how increased parental participation and teacher confidence in visual art had impacted on community participation within project work, and in what ways project work practices may have evolved.

### **Research process 4.1: Exploring the data together**

Teachers undertook a process of analysis of project work documentation gathered over the previous 12 months to gain an understanding of the impact of change in curriculum practice on parent, child and teacher participation. This process had been suggested by the research advisory group as an approach to uncovering the interrelationship between participation and centre practices.

The three groups of teachers chose three projects each had undertaken during the past year. As a guide, teachers were requested to select one project that had taken place in the initial phase of change, the second during developments and the third at a time teachers considered the new practices to be well established. Documentation included teachers' meeting journals, children's learning stories and the collation of project documentation as presented for families/whanau to view. Each team reviewed their documentation in three separate cycles and fed back their reflections at monthly whole team meetings.

- Cycle one explored what was being documented about parental participation,
- Cycle two looked at what was recorded about children, and
- Cycle three looked at what was being recorded about the teaching role.

### **Teacher learning by looking to the past**

This research process strengthened teacher relationships by building dialogue across all team members about their beliefs and values regarding using a project approach to curriculum. It occurred at a critical point as it allowed three members, recently new to the teaching team, to contribute to what amounted to a review of the centre's philosophy. These teachers had not been involved in all the projects under review however, used this as an opportunity to develop their understandings about project work practices.

As the teacher researcher team analyzed the data they acknowledged how community practices, or ways of doing things, had evolved in direct response to the participation of members of the community. The process highlighted shifts that had occurred in teaching practice and offered understanding into why change had occurred. One major shift identified was that teachers had come to view all parents as ‘interested and competent parents’. Teaching practices had evolved to reflect this belief and as a result parent competence had strongly come in to view. Arthur et al. (1996) discuss how the process of empowering families starts with the recognition that they are competent people who make decisions for and about their children. On reflection, teachers could see how earlier practice might have been influenced by an assumption that not all parents are interested or want to be involved.

The following summaries provide insight into how teachers made sense of the data as they came to understand the interrelationship between community participation and collective teaching practice.

**Findings 4.1: Improved outcomes in relation to parental participation**

- Parental participation became more apparent over time as parents contributed ideas to, participated in and sometimes led the group’s experiences in project work.
- Documentation and data highlighted the variety of ways in which parents support their children’s participation in project explorations, including bringing relevant articles in from home, joining group times and encouraging their child to participate, assisting on excursions and continuing discussions with their child at home.
- Earlier projects showed that parents were informed about the children’s experiences after they had occurred whereas the more recent projects involved communication with parents from the beginning.
- Project focus moved from occurring as a negotiated process between children and teachers to one that also includes parents.
- Parents engaged noticeably more with their child’s documentation in profile books, with many contributing comments and information.

Findings : Improved outcomes in relation to parental participation

- Teachers reflected on how they were aware of many parents discussing children’s learning and experiences with them more regularly.
- Parental interest in children’s visual art experiences had come to form the basis of discussion between teacher and parent.

Findings : Improved outcomes in relation to parental participation

**Findings 4.2: Improved outcomes in relation to children’s participation**

- Documentation about children’s learning was typically set in the social context of the project work experience and reflected learning that teachers’ value in relation to project work.
- For the older learning group, documentation of children’s learning included the ways in which children expressed and contributed ideas and knowledge, how they participated with each other, the ways they went about exploring and investigating and the knowledge they were gaining.
- The younger two learning groups’ documentation included accounts of how children participated socially, the ways in which individuals engaged in the experiences, how common interests were shared and how children interacted and communicated with teachers and peers.
- Teachers in the infant toddler group identified the significant role parents play in assisting teachers to have the necessary knowledge and understanding of each child.
- Children displayed increased confidence to engage in project investigations as a direct result of the support provided by parents. Their project focus appeared to continue beyond centre experiences.
- Project work and visual art as social activities was reflected in documentation. Teachers, parents and children were written about as a collective group engaged in learning together.
- Children’s visual art learning was more evident. Teaching and learning stories described the use of visual art tools and media as supportive to children’s emerging knowledge and understandings.

Findings : Improved outcome in relation to children’s participation

#### Findings 4.3: Outcomes in relation to teacher participation

- All three teaching groups identified that over the period of the three projects their practices had changed as they took into account parents' ideas and contributions. Some examples of this were:
  - The use of project letters, updating parents on what the children were participating in and inviting parental contributions,
  - Including excursions with parental support as part of children's investigations,
  - Provision of a communal notice-board for parents to write up ideas,
  - Including parent comments or information from parents in children's learning stories in profiles,
  - Including a question to parents at the end of a learning story,
  - Sharing centre resources with parents such as books and audio tapes,
  - Holding 'celebration' events with parents and children for each project.
- Parental comments and direct feedback or questions to parents in documentation had gradually increased. Teachers commented on how writing about parents in the various forms of documentation was initially an uncomfortable experience. However, as parents engaged with their documentation this practice was reinforced as worthwhile and purposeful and it had become embedded in regular teacher practice.
- There were relatively few project work learning stories specifically about individual children, as the majority of the documentation described the group experience in a general way. Individual children were not necessarily referred to unless it was the child who could be identified as a key player in the group project.
- Teachers were incorporating visual art experiences into children's project work investigations more frequently. Experiences with children and other staff had contributed to individual teachers' confidence to participate in this curriculum area. Joint participation in visual art resulted in an increase of teaching and learning stories.

- Approaches to project work implementation strengthened as the changed mini-teams became more comfortable in their working relationships. Team-work practices are a critical component of project work.

The review of documentation highlighted how project work had developed as a culture within the community, one that all participants (children, parents and teachers) had influenced. There was a sense that the practices that had evolved created familiarity for the community in the way things are done in project work. Communication practices made participation visible to the community, and in some ways this contributed to an expectation by the community that they will be kept informed and offered opportunities to participate.

### **The impact of change in community membership on the cultural practices of project work**

Toward the end of the review process further changes in staffing occurred as two longer-term members shifted from one area of the centre to the other, between over-tuos and infants and toddlers. This resulted in change in membership of the three mini-teaching teams who each took responsibility for projects with the three age-groupings of children (infant and toddlers, the younger group and older group). There was also a change occurring in children's relationships as many of the older children were leaving for school.

During the final stages of the review process the new teachers to the mini-teaching teams had the opportunity to learn about project work practices in their new area of responsibility and therefore come from an 'informed place'. Research became a tool for improving knowledge of everyday teaching and learning practice. Although this proved to be a time consuming activity it also served as a very timely exercise: the process was beneficial for the teaching team as a whole! Teacher learning benefited through data analysis. The process of the whole teacher researcher team reflecting on how things were, are now and might be in the future, uncovered a fusion of the centre's past and present, and indicated a possible future identity.

Teacher relationships were being strengthened by continuing to engage in dialogue across all team members about their beliefs and values regarding using a project approach to curriculum. An outcome of the ongoing dialogue was the emergence of a collective teacher identity in relation to project work. The new and established teachers shared and discussed collective understandings and ways of acting. Commonalities in what teachers do in project work with the various age groups of children were identified as the teachers' collective identity and provided a basis for the teaching team to progress from.

Teachers:

- Attend to children's thinking
- Respond to children's interests and enquiries by adding ideas to extend the experience
- Facilitate children's connections with prior experience and learning
- Enrich the experience with the provision of resources, including resource people
- Engage in learning with the children and parents and model an enjoyment of learning
- Facilitate shared meaning-making by unravelling the known and unknown
- Develop their own content knowledge through researching for and with the children.

Discussion about project work continued as the newly forming teaching teams continued to develop their working relationships. At this point the teacher researcher team became aware that there were only three remaining teachers who had been a part of establishing and implementing project work from the beginning of the centre's journey (4 years ago). The other five teachers had begun working in the centre at different times, and had learnt about and adopted project work practices through 'coming on board'. As teacher relationships strengthened so too did a climate of inquiry as some existing practices became questioned.

### **Time for further change**

The 'culture' of scheduled group times became questioned. Teachers discussed how a sense of 'compulsion to attend' had crept in to the group times, with children and teachers becoming less engaged. The tension teachers were experiencing appeared to be a tension between the vision of the principle of empowerment (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the view they held for co-learning with children. The principle of empowerment in the early childhood curriculum cautions against compulsion for children's participation whereas co-learning had connotations at that time that teachers and children come together for a group dialogue. Coercion versus co-learning?

Teachers also become aware that they had only been observing and documenting each group of children as a 'cohesive' unit:

*"The separate group times, they are much more than just a time of the day when the over-twins just happen to be split into two groups for convenience' sake. We seem to be interpreting these two groups as two separate 'cohesive units' of children that (within each group) magically seem to want to learn the same thing, that is – the current project focus.*

*But did they, how many of them were ever engaged with this experience at any one time?"*  
(Head teacher's personal reflection, Nov 2005)

Teachers expressed frustration about how they were feeling obliged to keep the children in the group for the sake of team management while, at the same time attempting to engage the interest of all children in the group. Moreover, recent experiences of children's individual projects (refer to Blake's story, chapter 3 and Michaels story, chapter 2) had highlighted how a group often does not follow one 'single rhythm' (Giudici *et al.*, 2001) or interest area. In a collective group of individuals, there are in fact a multitude of 'rhythms' or areas of interest occurring within any one moment of time. The culture of co-learning within a group should involve participants engaging in an interest together by contributing their own perspectives, knowledge and enthusiasms. In reality, the tensions of compulsion and disengagement were not conducive to creating the enriching conditions for the group-learning situation.

#### **Supporting literature 4.3: Group situations enrich certain kinds of intelligence**

Giudici *et al.*, (2001) describe a group situation as offering an enriching condition where many of the characteristics of intelligence are recognized and utilized, that is 'argumentation and explaining, negotiation, the capacity to consider multiple possibilities of the same problem, and the ability to use other points of view as a resource.' (p. 165).

A further concern voiced by teaching staff was that they had become aware of parents viewing the placement of their child in the two groups of children as an indication of their child's progression. Parents regularly asked when their child would move to the next group as if seeing this movement as a form of graduation for their child. Teachers were very uncomfortable with this as it felt as though this view placed unreasonable expectations and pressures on children. This was a situation where centre practice had been misinterpreted within the community. Teachers were motivated to change practice to rectify the situation for the children.

Following team discussions the practice of having 'scheduled group times' for the differing age groups of children was stopped. However, the action of giving up the scheduled group time created a 'void' for teachers in which they felt a sense of insecurity about how project work could continue. The group times had previously been pivotal to supporting ongoing project work. The implications of no longer separating the over-two year olds into age specific groupings for project work were that project work now potentially involved all five staff and all 31 children in the over-two programme.

### ***Reconnecting with the vision: Re-igniting the ‘magic’***

Teachers attempted to re-establish group project work in the programme over a three month period without scheduled group times for discussion and dialogue with children. They had hoped that group times would just emerge during the regular programme as they continued to hold a belief in the value of engaging in group dialogue with children; however, this was not to be. During team discussions frustrations about progress were apparent. As one teacher described it, *“I know we’ve changed our format.... I know we’re all a bit tentative about it ‘cos it’s new, but I’d love that magic that we once did have.”*

The magic this teacher referred to is the vision teachers held for project work in the centre. It was based on the longer-term teachers’ prior experiences and can be illustrated in the following story.

Julie MacMillan, a parent and management board member at the centre, had previously shared her story with the teaching team. This story was viewed as an historic artefact of the learning community as it encapsulated the vision of ‘magic’ that the teaching team strove to re-ignite. It illustrated the value of connected experiences between home and preschool when all participants take on active and shared roles in children’s learning. Julie’s own interest was stimulated through a group project experience in the centre that then became a shared learning experience with all of her family. Her story was an example of continuity in learning between the centre and home in which each setting has taken responsibility for co-constructing learning with her son Liam.

## Julie's story: Hot air balloons

Written by Julie for a presentation at the Community-Based Childcare Early Childhood Education Workshop Day, 29.5.04

The reason why I joined the management board is to have the input into running the centre and knowing that the decisions I make can be beneficial for my son in the centre. One of the big draw cards for my reason to join was knowing that the centre had just been accepted in the Centre of Innovation research project. Not that I knew a lot about it at the time but I wanted to learn more and thought if I was on the management board I would be able to have that knowledge.

*I would like to tell you about one of the projects and how Liam, my 2 year old son, has continued to learn from it, not only at preschool but also from his experiences outside preschool with his family.*

*One morning I enter the centre and here is the art teacher, Libby, filling a hot air balloon with a hair dryer. Of course everyone including children and parents are so interested in this. It seems like none of the parents want to leave as they are all enthralled by the experience. That morning the balloon is taken outside for the children to really see how it works. The children are just so engrossed by it.*



*The following Saturday we had just finished dinner and I looked out the kitchen window to see a hot air balloon in the sky. My two boys quickly look out the window and see it too. I realize it is descending so we drop everything and jump in the car to follow the balloon. I try and figure out where it is so I start heading to the Lyttelton tunnel road. I have two very excited boys in the car with the seven year old asking me questions about how they fly and descend. I have to be a science teacher now as well as driver. We hit Lyttelton tunnel road and are*

*confronted with half of Christchurch doing the same as us. The road is full, with cars parked on the side of the road watching the balloon land in a paddock. I have Liam just saying "balloon, balloon", and the seven year old asking me a lot of questions which I didn't know a lot about. We watch it land and how the balloon is packed up. I even learnt a couple of things, like the vent on top of the balloon is opened up to empty it of air.*

*Then we learn there is going to be a hot air balloon display at Hororata on Saturday evening. We decide to pack a picnic dinner and head out to Hororata. As we near Hororata the cars are only moving at a snail pace. We can't believe how many people are here in this little country town to see the balloons. We see a fabulous display with 12 balloons just hovering off the ground and glowing to the beat of the music. What a great experience and both boys thoroughly enjoyed it, as we did!*

*Then on Wednesday some library books that Libby (teacher) has brought into the preschool were left out on the table at pick up time. Liam picks one up. Somehow he finds a book with a picture of hot air balloons. Libby goes to the books and realizes he has found a page with the balloons. Then the subject is bought up. With Libby's enthusiasm, she gets out the hot air balloon and starts talking to Liam about his experiences with the balloons. She even makes a wee poem:*

*1,2,3,4,5.*

*Watching hot air  
balloons in the sky.*

*6.7.8.9.10.*

*The wind has blown  
them away again.*

*Without teachers' enthusiasm this whole experience with hot air balloons would not have had the same impact, not only on Liam's life but also on that of his family.*

This story exemplified the centre's image of its community of learners in action. Each participant was instrumental in the learning process and each transformed in some way as a result (Rogoff, 1994). Liam had the benefit of having his interest in and learning about hot air balloons

recognized and facilitated in both settings, centre and home. Julie acknowledges the duality of her role as both teacher and learner. Centre practices involved a relationship between Julie and the teachers in which sharing contextual knowledge of Liam's experiences was valued. Julie's familiarity with centre project work is evidenced in her use of the common language associated with this in the centre. The shared excitement and recognition of all participants' contributions is what teachers mean by 'magic' BINGO moments.

### **Reconstructing practice: Re-building community culture**

Removal of the group times as a cultural practice in the programme had resulted in 'a loss of magic'. Removing the group times had detrimentally impacted on the participation of teachers, children and parents. The teacher researcher team became involved in exploring how to reconstruct group project work in the curriculum.

#### **Research Process 4.2: Teacher researchers investigate approaches to project work**

1. Two research meetings held one month apart with the research associate were devoted to reflective discussion about project work in the centre. At the first meeting teachers brainstormed a list of existing teaching practices they considered to be important to retain in order to support project work. The time between meetings provided teachers with the opportunity to reflect on current project work experiences in order to confirm or review their initial ideas. At the second meeting the list was re-visited and the resulting discussion tape-recorded and transcribed. Teachers redefined their understandings of projects and identified a list of 'teaching principles' to guide team practices.
2. Teachers implemented their ideas for project work over a further four months. At weekly team meetings they monitored their progress and discussed issues as they arose. Decisions made were documented in the staff-meeting book.
3. The teacher researcher team met five months later to reflect on and review project work practices to identify key developments and the reasons underpinning these.

### **Teacher learning through the process of change**

The 'void' that occurred as a result of removing scheduled group times provided the time for the teaching team to take a fresh look at how they could proceed with group project work in the centre. The team acknowledged that taking away an established practice allowed them to view aspects of their practice that they would not have otherwise been aware of. The practice of scheduled group times had been an inherited practice for this current teaching team. They had also inherited other established processes and structures that supported the team to implement project work in the centre. The process of reflecting on what they collectively had come to value about project work as an approach to curriculum enabled the teaching team to relate their ongoing experiences to their beliefs about how the project approach is supportive to learning in this

community. Experience of the way things were contributed to the team determining how things might be.

### **Finding the spark: The teachers' story**

The following story provides insight into the over twos teachers' journey as they gradually re-establish project work in the centre and a revised culture around it. The project occurred over the course of three months. As the project unfolded teaching practices responded to the participation of children. It becomes evident that this project experience involved teachers in learning about and questioning their own practices. The magic that project work offers begins to be re-ignited and community identity once again emerges.



**How does fire start on water?**

### **A project inquiry**

Author Alana, February 2006

Last year brought many changes in how we implemented project work into the over-two programme. From the beginning of the year we began to really reflect upon what project work looked like in our centre. This resulted in us collectively questioning aspects of our individual practices and that of the centre.

The project inquiry, "How does fire start on water" emerged from a discussion I had with a child in the middle of last year. I had recently attended the Alise Shafer workshop at the Christchurch College of Education. It was here where I deepened my understanding of inquiry based learning and this encouraged me to return to work with new eyes and ears - I was seeing *and* noticing, listening *and* hearing what children were saying and it was interesting and exciting!

#### **Influence 4.1: Alise Shafer workshop**

From personal notes taken during Alise Shafer's workshop "*The stories we tell: finding, understanding and enhancing out own stories through documentation*" held at Christchurch College of Education, 9.7.05

Alise's presentation challenged early childhood teachers to "set aside adult agendas to listen to children and understand what the emergent curriculum really is." Alise proposed a concept of 'repair theory' that she bases on the theoretical foundation of social constructivism.

"It begins with the child and what they bring to the experience (their theory). Peers and children come together to unpack the facts that make up the theory. When you find the fact that doesn't

How does fire start on water? A project inquiry

fit, you bring that to the fore to challenge their theory. This results in new theory and then you unpack and check it again with the children. Constructivism is about a cycle of unpacking theory and reconstructing it – theory repair.” (Jocelyn’s notes)

### **A child’s inquiry**

This project originated with Blake, which was no surprise to me, as my earlier story of Blake (Chapter 3) describes how we developed a strong working relationship. This time Blake was planning for making a fireboat and I was writing down his plan. He explained:

*“It will be red, fire boats are red. It needs a hose at the back and a hose at the front...if there is a fire on the water... (pauses and looks away thinking) up from the sky and it comes on the water, then it will put out the fire on the water”.*

We went on to discuss this further. Blake knew that water from the hoses was there to put the fire out; however, if that theory is true how could it be that the sea-water couldn’t put out the fire? We couldn’t help but wonder, “If water puts out fire, how does fire start on water?”

### **A group inquiry: The reflection process**

As a team we have weekly reflection meetings to discuss the project. At this time we had been between projects for several weeks. We had reformed mini-teaching teams again and as a new team we had been spending our reflection meetings discussing a vision for what we believed project work to be. As part of the research process we took this discussion to the entire team. We believed that by discussing it as a mini-team and documenting it in our own reflections first it would assist us to work together as a whole team to incorporate the vision into centre practice.

#### **Teacher reflections taken from teachers’ journal - week ending 29 July 2005**

Alana, Christina and Sarah

We asked ourselves what we believed project work to be and how this looked in our practice and programme. We all strongly agreed that a project is child-led, emerged from an inquiry of a child (or teacher) and is supported by us by listening and recording the children’s discussions and using drawing as a tool for children to convey theories, thoughts and ideas (this is an area that we are keen to see happening). We will follow

the inquiry until we have discovered it! This is looking different again from our projects last year; Sarah and I agree that these projects were more teacher-led and while they were from children's interest the projects were not an inquiry as such. We talked about the theory repair that Alise Shafer talked about at her workshop. This is what we want to see in our projects - not teaching children the facts of the topic ...

### **The re-introduction of group times**

Group times allow children to meet together to discuss and share their thoughts, experience and theories on the project topic. Group times enable direction for the project and often generate interest; however, we have found that alone they do not sustain interest.

In the past we had a scheduled group time every day at 11:45am with children forming three different groups. We had removed this as is explained in the earlier part of this chapter. We then offered emergent group times, for groups that emerged during children's play and conversations supported by a teacher or teachers. This approach did not occur as we originally thought it would. We found it was too big a jump to move from a set time where everyone comes together, to meeting together in an informal approach whenever, however and with whomever! We had to find our place again and this time we compromised between the two, offering a group time every morning at 10:30am for children who wanted to come, as well as any other group times that emerged during the day.

### **What this looks like in practice**

Depending on the day, we like to have at least two teachers come to the group time, one to record conversations and the other as a facilitator. Beforehand we invite all children by informing them what it is that we are discussing (this is usually determined from the previous day). Depending on the day and stage of the project we may have anywhere between two and twelve children. The ideal number we have found is between four and seven children, as this number allows for in-depth discussion resulting in meaningful group meetings lasting up to 30 minutes. We introduced the idea of the children having an opportunity to draw to convey their ideas at the end of the group time. Often the drawing done after the meeting enables children to continue the meetings further. As the children draw, their ideas and stories

arise, and this can stir dialogue again.

An example of exactly how beneficial this has been is when Tyler, a child who always came to our group times but never contributed, verbally quietly shared with us his experience of fire. Unfortunately we weren't able to understand what he was saying so we offered him a clip-board to draw on to convey what he was saying. As he was doing this he began to more confidently tell us what he was drawing. Once he knew that we understood he became very comfortable and the other children were naturally very excited about this fire he had seen.



Tyler told me about his experience of fire!  
“The white building was on fire, a big one”  
“Where were you?” I asked  
“At the big hotel, looking out the window.”  
Connor asked “why were you looking out the window?”  
“because I heard it”  
I asked “What noise was it?”  
“No I heard the fire engines” Tyler clarified

### Teacher reflections

Taken from teachers' planning journal: Alana, Christina and Sarah,  
week ending 17 August 200

In a recent meeting Tyler T told us *briefly* about a fire he had seen in a white building and I wasn't too sure exactly what he was saying, however when he came to draw, he began to tell me all about it, he pointed to the window and the building, he told me he was in a hotel looking out the window at the fire. By this stage other children were listening and Connor asked him some questions, “How did you hear it?” etc. I look forward to talking with Mum about this experience it sounded very exciting!

As we became more accustomed to having group times again, they became a strong focus point in our reflection meetings. We began examining our role within these times, our practice and what is it we want to achieve from these times. The first change we made was changing the title ‘group times’ to ‘group meetings’. We wanted

these times purely for discussion separate from group times and experiences that happen throughout the day. We felt the word meeting reflected what it was we wanted to achieve; a common ground where we all come together to reflect, inform, challenge, review and plan.

### **Contextual happenings within the centre**

The interest in fire was further developing in the centre: Libby, our art teacher, had become aware of it through hearing conversations during her work with children. Libby began to work on a plaster of paris volcano with the children. This led to further inquiries that she supported and followed through with visual experiences, books and a DVD on an eruption. This was all coinciding with our project inquiry. As teachers we hadn't even had a chance to share about it amongst ourselves. The children had done this for us. At this stage different teachers were working with children in different ways on a common topic. This was enabling different interests and inquiries to be followed. Momentum built for this project and the outcomes met the needs of a wide range of children.

### **Differing theories on fire**

During our meetings and conversations throughout each day we heard different theories and ideas from the children regarding fire, based on their personal experience and prior knowledge and those of other children. By listening to these and documenting them we were able to detect the direction of the project inquiry and help repair some of these theories. Fire on water was a common theme and there was no doubt that the children knew fire could start on water. Many of them had seen this in a book or on T.V. They were also all in agreement that water puts fire out. We reflected upon the children's conversations and it was obvious through these that they had questioned how there could be fire on water if water puts fire out. We agreed that there was a universal interest in this inquiry and that we would follow this inquiry as a group.

### **Why can't fire start on water?**

During our meetings we (children and teachers) decided we needed to test 'starting a fire on water.' It was decided there was no other way! With lots of conversation about safety issues we carefully tried lighting a bowl of water using a match but with no luck. The children were convinced it was the matches that were failing and if we used a

lighter it would work. Testing this new idea some days later we found it still wasn't lighting. The children talked among themselves.

### **Documented account of group time discussion – 15<sup>th</sup> August**

Crahsau said, "Maybe sand would help?" The children agreed and went to get some sand. This didn't work either!

Cayden approached and said, "Fire can't start on water, water is water, fire is fire - water dies it!" The group of children was perplexed... I wonder who we could ask, who would know?

Cayden replied, "I know... we could go to the beach and ask a man on a boat...fire does start on fire because I looked at a volcano book and it was on the water".

### **Planning a trip to ask a man on a boat**

We informed the children in our group meeting about Cayden's idea and everyone agreed that going to find a man on a boat was the solution to our inquiry. We then had the problem of finding a boat that we could get on. Cayden said, "If the boat stops at the sand we could hop on"; Toby had a totally different idea, "Some boats have wheels so we can buy one, it's near the beach (the shop)". We planned to go to Lyttelton and came up with the idea of asking the man who steers the Diamond Harbour launch which leaves every ½ hour for a return trip. The children at that stage didn't realize that we also planned to actually take them on the boat!

### **Off we go!**

Kevin, a parent coming on the trip, helped planned the route. It was very scenic on the way over the hills and then through the tunnel on the way back. Rob (Albert's Dad) led the way and made two stops at view-points for us all to get out and have a look at the view of the harbour to incorporate children's interest in volcanoes. As the children learnt, this harbour was once a volcano.

Many of the children had never been on a boat, so at the beginning it was very overwhelming but by the end of the trip the children were ready to ask Stu (the Captain) some questions. He told us that he had never seen a fire on water but had heard of them happening before in the harbour and that they were caused from oil that has leaked from

ships. The children were particularly happy when he mentioned that hoses from the boats put out the fires!

### **The end of an inquiry**

The trip appeared to satisfy the children's understanding and questions about fire on water, but there was still an interest in fire in general. Kevin, our supportive parent and ex-fireman, offered to make a phone call to the fire department to ask if they could help us in some way. As a result a fire-engine arrived at the centre and children had the opportunity to explore the fire-truck. They were also provided with messages about fire safety and how to keep themselves safe. This was valuable learning for everyone in the centre but also left us with a dilemma. How do we safely support children's interests and inquiries as they develop their knowledge about fire? We collaborated with Libby (art teacher) as we knew she was also aware of this interest and together we generated some ideas to bring back to discuss with the children. An investigation into volcanoes eventuated, but that's another story for another time ...

### **Summary**

We never envisioned that as a result of making the structural changes to group times we would become so involved in reflecting upon, discussing and challenging our practices both individually and as a team. Through the fire on water inquiry we were able to put new practices and processes in place and find our place within these. We discovered new practices such as drawing at the end of meetings. Old practices which we aren't prepared to give away, are finding ground again especially parental participation, as we believe parents are also finding their place in project work again.

Children drawing their ideas and theories related to our project at the end of group meetings has been really beneficial to our understanding of children and helps us make sense of their feelings, experiences and thoughts. The children love this time with some deciding to join us just for this part. We spend a great length of time drawing and we document as much conversation as we can from the children at this time. We display their pictures alongside their stories and comments in our project folder for the children to revisit and show their friends and family. This practice has become a regular part of our project group meetings and there are aspects of it we are now further considering. We have been asking ourselves how we can support children with their drawing skills. We also want to make meaningful observations about the children's work by examining their

drawings more closely as a team.

Through this project our collective practices and understandings have been strengthened. Through this project we came to understand how pursuing a child's inquiry can result in valuable learning for adults just as much as for the children. This is what excites us and motivates our work with the children and families at the centre. As a team we held the common belief that children are empowered teachers and learners, competent and confident. Now that we have experienced the power of this belief, we understand and believe it whole-heartedly.

How does fire start on water?

### ***Reflections on teacher learning: Why practice changed***

When the teacher researcher team had its final meeting, group project work was well underway again in the centre; however, it did not look the same as before. The team reflected on what had changed and why these changes had come about. It became evident that the original beliefs about the elements and processes of project work and how these are supportive of community learning (as described in chapter 1) had been retained in the minds of the collective group. The changes that had been made were in relation to the organizational structures, teacher practices that support project work and, perhaps most significantly, understandings of what a project focus is.

The team recognized they had been too focused on their own needs in their initial attempts to re-establish project work, as they attempted to redefine their roles and responsibilities to accommodate new staff arriving at that time. Their way forward had been to shift their focus back to their community in the following ways:

1. Refocusing on the children. In the absence of group project work (during the reconstruction period) teachers had begun to identify with individual children's learning as holding resemblance to a project journey. They had been documenting sequences of stories such as the stories about Casey and Blake in chapter 3 (individual projects). Children had shown teachers that project learning was occurring, it just looked different from how teachers were attempting to construct it.
2. Refocusing on what was happening for the community. Informal conversations amongst teachers and parents revealed that parents and whanau had been asking about projects, they were waiting for direction from the teachers.

## 1. Refocusing on the children

The teaching team's experiences with individual projects had 'opened their eyes' to how children engage in many forms of projects, in different ways and different times. 'Coming to know' children's autonomous projects (a term introduced by Giudici, Rinaldi & Krechevsky (2001)) was an important factor teachers considered as they forged new ways to document children's individual on-going learning. Teachers gained an appreciation of how project investigations can occur at any time throughout the centre programme. On reflection they realized that previously too much reliance had been placed on scheduled group times as the 'time project work occurred'.

### Supporting literature 4.4: Autonomous projects

Giudici, Rinaldi & Krechevsky (2001) recognize that "there are many projects that children carry out in a completely autonomous way... We only *come to know* of a few of these, but we are certain that many of them happen without us being aware of them" (p.174).

### Findings 4.4: Individual projects

The teaching team had come to view their continuous stories about individual children's learning as 'individual projects' as they had begun to mirror all the elements of what this team understood about projects:

- Projects are about focused areas of learning, not necessarily a topic but an inquiry. They involve the joint participation of children, parents and teachers who are involved in investigating and making discoveries about learning.
- Project inquiries originate with the child. They are based on an area of learning or interest of the child/ren.
- A project journey cannot be predetermined.
- Project journeys are about sustained and involved learning over time. Teachers and others engage with the child or children's interest and follow through the journey with them.
- Project inquiries are a vehicle for social participation. The social grouping involves parents, teachers and children participating together. The group may be in relation to one child or a larger group of children.
- Participants can be experts as well as learners as knowledge and learning occurs as a shared venture within a social context.
- Project inquiries are supported by documentation that engages community participants in discussing and revisiting experiences.

Findings : individual projects

The teaching team retained the belief that group times with children are essential for engaging in dialogue about project investigations and for participating in co-learning. They acknowledged that this naturally occurs when working with individuals or two or three children during an

individual project but is more difficult to orchestrate with larger groups of children. The team found it useful to make a differentiation between group times that engage people in dialogue and group times where people participate in a learning experience or activity. They introduced the concept of group meetings for dialogue, and group experiences for investigative activity. This shared understanding supported them in their way forward. Group project work experiences could occur at any time during the programme and allow flexibility as children chose to participate. Interestingly, the team could identify how, over time, the group experiences always attracted those children who were vitally interested in the project and more often than not it was the full time children. The infectiousness of the experience attracted others who sometimes became fully involved, as did their families.

## **2. Refocusing on what was happening for the community**

During periods of change the teacher researcher team became aware of the fact that, as new staff joined the teaching team, their interest/focus shifted from creating opportunities for authentic and purposeful communication between parents and teachers to a focus on developing shared understandings about project work within the team. They were paying less attention to centre communication practices and relationships with families and, as a result, project work failed to attract full participation of family, children and even teachers. Sustaining a project journey had proved difficult at that time for teachers as reduced participation meant that the enthusiasm and motivation to follow children's learning over time rested with the teaching team or even individual teachers. This situation differed from the earlier time when teachers within the mini-teaching teams held common understandings about project work and confidently engaged the community in children's learning experiences, as was evidenced in the data they had explored together. It appeared that when the teachers shared and had confidence in a collective identity, community participation grew. When change occurred within the teaching team, their collective identity became fragile and community participation was reduced.

The teaching team returned their focus to the participation of children and parents in their community. They became aware of how previous scheduled group times had excluded the participation of children who attended afternoons only as they always occurred just before lunch-time. In this centre, 80% of children attend on a part-time basis, with different children attending different portions of the week and mainly for nine hours each. Prior practice was not seen to be inclusive. As an inherited practice the team had not inherited the original understanding that underpinned the practice. The original teaching team had planned the timing of group times with the vision that both morning and afternoon children could participate.

A new structure was put in place to support group-meeting times in both the morning and afternoons. 10.30 am and 1.30pm were viewed as times of the day when team members could work together in a group meeting context. Scheduled meetings did not need to take place every day as the team acknowledged there was still a place for emergent group meetings with children. The scheduled time established a collective understanding within the team that this was the time when teachers would work in collaborative support of one another to facilitate and document children's discussions. Participation in a meeting was driven by child choice as the regular programme continued. Children's interest in the project inquiry would determine whether or not they wished to participate.

Teachers were able to retain their mini-teaching team structure to focus on project planning as the existing organization of non-contact meetings together remained in place. One mini-teaching team took responsibility for the morning meeting and one project, while the other for the afternoon meeting and another project. The team saw that this approach could allow for afternoon children's project inquiries to differ from the morning children's. The team could also see how a common project could eventuate as a result of the images and discussion that permeates the centre when a project is in full swing.

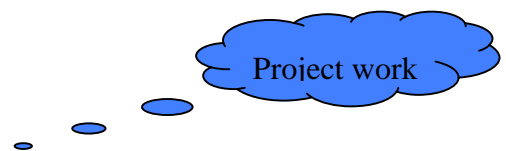
Teachers came to realize that creating a culture for group meetings by using familiar artefacts and resources was supportive of children's participation. They discussed how creating a sense of purpose and importance for focused group discussions enabled children to predict and choose their participation. As one teacher commented; *"when we have this group time we've been getting out a specific mat or something so the children realize that they're having a group time, and they bring out that, like wow, it's group time. And that interest in; 'I wonder what we're going to be talking about?' That really helps."* Teachers had also noticed how some children have reconnected with the prior culture of group meeting participation as they re-establish group norms of behaviour: *"like (child) saying it's my turn to talk. Mm, and they've been good about passing things round the circle. You know how we used to pass it round?"* It became apparent to teachers that the children in their community had not lost their motivation to participate; they had been waiting for teachers to provide the opportunities again. Another aspect that created a sense of familiarity with a project was that children seemed to identify with the mini teaching team responsible for each project investigation.

For the teaching team, the removal of scheduled group times had also meant that children were no longer separated into age specific groups for projects. Teachers' identity of competent and capable members of the community now meant that younger and older children participated

together in project investigations. The teaching team found that this brought challenges as well as benefits to their work. They acknowledged that older children provided a role model of participation for the younger children during these discussion times; *“it’s a bit harder for the young ones to get that idea of (sitting in) a circle though. But I think with the culture of the older ones it will hopefully help them copy.”* This concept was not totally new in the centre as past teaching teams had noted younger siblings joining an older group. The difference was now in the reasons behind the age mixing of children. Previously it had been viewed as supportive of separation from parents, whereas now it was viewed as productive of community learning as every member has something to offer and something to gain as a result.

### **The critical role of teachers in community identity.**

These teachers collectively held strong beliefs about the value of using a project approach to curriculum for children. These beliefs had been shaped partially through the inherited experiences of the community as well as through the passion of the longer-term teachers who had experienced the magic of projects. Engaging in critical dialogue and reflection enabled the current teaching team to honestly evaluate practices and processes for implementing projects. An outcome of this area of exploration has been that teachers gained understanding of how centrally important their participation is in shaping this community. Teachers set the scene for the culture of the community through their beliefs, relationships and practices. While the teaching team had turned their energies inwards to focus on their practice, the community had been in waiting; teachers had taken their eyes off their community. When they returned their focus to the community they found that children and parents/whanau held a key to the way forward. The identity of the learning community came into view again as teachers negotiated their beliefs with the participation of people in the learning community to form a better match between their vision and practice.



### **An emerging new insight – an exciting shift in understanding**

As project practices became re-established the teacher researcher team became aware that a subtle but very significant shift had occurred in understandings about what a project is based on. Acknowledgement of the shift in understanding came about as the teacher researcher team reflected on their research data (recent stories about centre projects) and noticed that they were

using a different word to describe a project. The term ‘inquiry’ was visible in documentation; it hadn’t been before. On reflection, teachers acknowledge that this concept is difficult to put into words for others however, the shift we are highlighting is apparent in the way projects are now talked about as project inquiries rather than project work.

The ‘*How does fire start on water?*’ story in this chapter illustrates the shift. As described in this story one influence to change in teacher practice had occurred when some of the teaching team attended Alise Shaffer’s workshop. The ideas Alise shared about children theorizing and inquiring held relevance for teachers as it was at the time when the team were questioning their approaches and understandings about project work in the centre. Alise’s ideas added a new layer of thought for teachers. The influence of this teacher learning emerged quietly during the period the team were attempting to re-establish projects in the centre.

A key difference between project work and project inquiry that the research team identify is that a project is viewed as a topic whereas an inquiry it is framed more as a question that demands investigation. The following chart captures some of the shifts, or changes in the ways community members participate, that the teacher researcher team have become aware of through recent experience.

**Exhibit 4.2: Unpacking differences between project work and project inquiry**

	Project work	Project inquiry
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Look for a common theme in children’s interests</li> <li>▪ Listen to what children know and don’t know</li> <li>▪ Discuss knowledge and offer perspectives</li> <li>▪ Prepare ideas and resources to enable children to explore the topic</li> <li>▪ Organise experiences to support learning about the project focus</li> <li>▪ More often in the lead – in the drivers seat while negotiating with the passenger</li> <li>▪ Document learning as a collection of stories about children ‘finding out’ about the project topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listen more and talk less</li> <li>▪ Closely follow children’s thinking/actions and look for the ideas or concepts they are querying</li> <li>▪ Share interest in the inquiry – it has relevance to teachers as well!</li> <li>▪ Spend time supporting children to communicate ideas and thinking e.g. through visual media</li> <li>▪ Consider experiences that may extend children’s thinking or enable them to discover solutions</li> <li>▪ More often following the lead of children – in the passenger seat negotiating with the driver (the child/ren)</li> <li>▪ Document learning as a sequence of connected stories about children making sense of their inquiry</li> </ul>

<p><b>Children</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child/ren’s interest – a topic</li> <li>▪ Discuss knowledge and offer perspectives</li> <li>▪ Collaborate and negotiate what they would like to do next or how they could learn more</li> <li>▪ Knowledge and understandings about the topic is the main focus for learning</li> <li>▪ Actively participate in a social context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child/ren’s inquiry or a wonder</li> <li>▪ Talk and discuss, think and consider</li> <li>▪ Collaborate and negotiate what they would like to do next or how they could learn more – often initiate the next step</li> <li>▪ Capabilities and learning dispositions for ongoing learning are the main focus for learning – the process of coming to know as well as what they learn</li> <li>▪ Actively participate in a social context</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parents/Whanau</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Become interested through their child’s participation in centre experiences</li> <li>▪ Discuss knowledge and offer perspectives</li> <li>▪ Participate by contributing expertise and support</li> <li>▪ Offer resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participate through sharing in the inquiry – they are questioning too!</li> <li>▪ Share and discuss their queries/theories with teachers</li> <li>▪ Participate by contributing expertise and support</li> <li>▪ Offer resources</li> </ul>

Developing understandings of using inquiries as the basis for group learning experiences in the centre continues to be a focus for the teaching team as this research project comes to an end. In the following chapter, ‘A way of being’, we return to this shift in teacher understanding as we identify another influence that is contributing to the changes teachers are making to practice.

### ***Igniting the magic - Concluding reflections***

#### **Community learning**

Learning together is the ‘magic’ that drives this learning community. The enthusiasm and passion for learning – their own and others - modeled by teachers becomes infectious to other participants of the community. If they wane, community participation wanes.

Teachers hold a critical role in shaping the learning community. Teacher beliefs and practice in the early childhood centre create a culture for the community. The ways in which community members respond to the culture, or ways of doing things, forms the identity of the community. The practices teachers adopt have a direct effect on participation of others within their learning community. When the practices of the teaching team become tenuous or fragile, they can have a detrimental impact on the participation of other community members, children and parents.

Teachers who are motivated and driven by a community vision forge a collective teacher identity that can reshape, repair and build community identity.

Community identity is not a static concept. Participation in the learning community is a pathway to continuity of learning for individuals as experiences, knowledge and understandings gained in the early childhood context are layered over the experiences, knowledge and understandings each individual brings with them. Participating collectively is a pathway to future community learning as individual and collective learning is layered over historical and current centre practices, values and beliefs. Individual and community identity is co-emergent as both individuals and the community learn and transform through participation.

Change in a learning community can provide the opportunity for critical re-evaluation of the community's activity. Practices or ways of doing things never stay the same; they adapt and alter according to the influences of the community. Existing practices become a launching pad for developing new ways of doing things when members engage in honest reflective discussions. By taking notice of the 'voices' of the community, teachers can deconstruct practice, and then reconstruct it to develop a better match between their vision for participation in the community and practice. A learning community takes time and opens itself to taking risks while building community.

From the beginning of this project teachers identified with the view of children as competent and capable learners. As the research progressed, residue of the developmental perspective was discovered in teacher practices. It became apparent that adopting a socio-cultural co-constructivist pedagogical approach cannot be a simple task. Early childhood teachers, in general, have come from a historical position where developmental and behaviourist theories have dominated teacher training and practice. Our research verified the perspective that historical and cultural practices remain influential on current and future practices. It is not a simple matter of 'off with the old and on with the new'. This New Beginnings Preschool teacher researcher team has progressed in its socio-cultural understandings through intensive investigations of individual and collective practices. A question that remains in the minds of the teaching team is "are there further developmental theoretical influences remaining in practice that we have not yet questioned?" The answer to this remains unknown as the team continues to question, reflect on and challenge teaching practices in the centre.

Documentation of learning is a valued artifact of the community. It is a key feature of our Preschool's identity. The relationship between observation, documentation and teacher reflection

leads to informed parents which in turn leads to parental knowledge and informed parental participation. Children's learning is encouraged, supported and celebrated as connecting links between home and centre cohere.

## **Researcher learning**

### ***Influences and supporting literature***

Initial understandings of socio-cultural theory supported teachers to recognize theory in practice. Teachers began to be adept at acknowledging the influence of varying theoretical perspectives. Influencing theory also provided confidence to the research team in the approach they took to their investigations because supporting literature affirmed that the dilemmas and emerging understandings of the team were relevant and worthwhile areas to continue investigating.

Influence gained through attendance at a one-day workshop (*The Stories we tell*. Shafer, A. 2005) proved to be significant as the ideas presented resonated with teachers' current dilemmas. Because a number of the teaching team attended the workshop they were able to immediately put new knowledge and understandings into practice as a team.

### ***Research processes***

Teacher documentation was the main tool of this research activity. Teaching and learning stories alongside the regular practice of documenting teacher reflections in journals provided the team with data based on centre practice. Documentation that offered researchers the opportunity to look back as well as to look forward proved to be invaluable as they strove to form a collective view of the learning community.

In addition, regular research practice of tape recording and transcribing discussion formed a memory of past thinking that assisted researchers in clarifying and debating collective perspectives. It enabled individual voices within the collective group to be heard. The end result was enhanced by reflection undertaken by the group as a whole.

Processes involved systematically looking to the past, the present and the future.

Acknowledgement of historical influences contributed to teacher learning as teachers came to recognize differences in the impact of different theoretical influences on practice. Community identity incorporates the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present.

Research investigations began in the domain of practice by focussing on the implementation of projects. The recursive element in all the processes was again evident as findings from previous research cycles, such as parental participation and visual art, contributed to the changes teachers

made to the ways they developed their practices in support of projects. Teachers were constantly building on current knowledge and experience and bringing that into their new investigations.