

# Communities of practice and National Quality Standards

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO, EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST AND UNIVERSITY LECTURER, B. TEACH. (ECE), B.ED. (ECE), M.ED.

Traditional professional development approaches have long centred on the learner receiving knowledge from the expert educator. For most early childhood professionals, learning of this nature has typically occurred through participation in workshops outside of the workplace context.

While such approaches do have the potential to yield positive results, communicating what has been learned to others, as is often expected, presents a real struggle for some educators. In this article, I introduce communities of practice (CoP), a professional learning approach considered more meaningful in facilitating focused dialogue and enriching workplace relationships – a ‘space’ where participants learn how to learn from within.

The notion of CoP is not new. This type of learning practice has existed for as long as people have been sharing experiences through storytelling. Inspired by scholars like Brown and Vygotsky, interest in researching ‘groups’ has emerged to better understand the collective experience of people in a given context. Viewed as part of both simple and

complex social systems, CoP embeds learning in settings where dual processes of meaning-making take place.

Meaning-making happens when CoPs are committed to working with the same collective, have a genuine connection, and share the vision of the group. The value exists in the type of knowledge and information that is openly shared; hence, the growth of the group emerges from their interaction as they engage with each other and discuss information. Members may or may not interact with each other outside of the group, but their collective interests bind them in the community. CoPs are successful when they respect each other’s contributions, and when the actions of the group have the interests of all members at heart. Regular discussions may result in suggestions for changes in practice that the community agree to. Practices may or may not be concrete; however, the conversation between participants may result in improved practice, which in itself contributes to the community.

In essence, CoP consists of people who come together to engage in a process of collective learning. The structural characteristics of CoPs are Domain, Community and Practice. The Domain refers to the body of knowledge that inspires participants to maintain

focused discussions. The Community refers to the social context in which the learning takes place, fostering productive interaction. The Practice refers to the topic of the group's focus, which evolves throughout the collaborative reflection process. Engaging with others directly in conversation and reflection is but one part of this process: CoP can extend their approach to include review of various forms of documented practice and resources sharing (Wenger, 1998).

Through regular interaction – which may take place formally or informally – CoPs succeed in reflective discussion, contribute to a review of current centre practices, and encourage participants to make effective and meaningful decisions. In respecting each other's viewpoints, CoP participants take learning seriously and commit to the group's shared longevity. Shared decision-making has been explored as a valuable approach in early education and care contexts, based on the idea that learning occurs best in groups when people share their endeavours and take collegial responsibility. While in-person discussions are highly valuable in physical settings, CoP can also exist 'virtually' by collaborating online or even via telephone.

In CoPs, participants are intrinsically motivated, and have a sense of ownership and responsibility for group tasks and group learning; however, unless groups are created and fostered, they become collectives with no real direction, purpose or long-term outcome. Successful groups involve participants who are purposefully created and supported by the provision of professional learning strategies, such as mentoring, modelling, coaching and scaffolding, which provide the best opportunity for participants to draw on each other's expertise. Learning is strengthened when educators draw on their past experience to guide their decision-making, and in CoP, knowledge-sharing can happen. Given that knowledge is determined by previous experience, having a forum for sharing provides the opportunity for those contributing to feel valued.

As stipulated in the National Quality Standards, Quality Area 4, collaborative workplace relationships are now mandated in education and care services across Australia. Furthermore, assessors are expecting to observe educators working collaboratively to 'affirm, challenge, support and learn from each other to further develop their skills and to improve



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practice and relationships' ([www.acecqa.gov.au/Staffing-arrangements](http://www.acecqa.gov.au/Staffing-arrangements)). While these standards don't specifically indicate ways by which educators should achieve this result, they do recommend the establishment of a lively culture of professional inquiry where issues relating to programs, the design of the environment and educator practices are openly debated. It is therefore expected that educators engage in joint decision-making and development of common understandings. While assessors may observe collaborative practices taking place during the course of their visit, they will also expect to discuss ways in which the service uses each other's strengths, talents and interests, the regularity of meetings that include collaborative work, opportunities for staff to learn from one another, how staff support and mentor each other, and how innovative ideas are shared and enacted.

While collaborative relationships between staff can be demonstrated for the purpose of mandated standards in a variety of ways, this article proposes

that an ongoing approach be formally put in place to support educators to learn and grow as a collective group. Recommended to take place regularly, CoP can be established for the purpose of regular engagement where collaborative discussions form the basis of ongoing quality improvement. Given participants commit to this process, reflective forums, such as those proposed here, would go a long way towards demonstrating positive ways educators can learn from each other.

Successful CoPs are purposeful in their approach, use time productively and commit to drive long-term success, regardless of the hurdles that may come along the way. With a mindset of regular engagement and commitment to longevity, participants can preserve the team's identity and continue their professional journey. **B**

Reference:

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

