reflecting and reframing
Enabling educators:

Skills 4 Kids Cafés as professional learning

Kim Beasy, Sherridan Emery, Di Nailon and Diane Boyd discuss the value of ‘sustainability skills cafés’—shared community spaces that aim to foster social cohesion—as a vehicle for professional learning in the early childhood field.

Upskilling the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce has long been recognised as a priority in Australia (Nailon, 2013). Here we share an innovative approach to professional learning (PL), where educators work alongside long-time early childhood education and other allied professionals to facilitate Skills 4 Kids Cafés. The cafés are designed to offer a contextualised approach to PL through situated learning where educators experiment with changing practices in a knowledge-rich environment (Lave, 1991).

We found that the skills cafés enabled educators to engage in ways that built on their existing knowledge about what works with young children (Nailon, 2013), and make active choices in how they engaged in the skills-based activities offered during the sessions through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave, 1991).

What are Skills 4 Kids Cafés?

‘Sustainability skills cafés’ (SSC) is a concept originally developed by Diane Boyd from Liverpool John Moores University in the United Kingdom. Diane implemented SSC in family centres and invited international researchers in early childhood education for sustainability to trial the SSC concept in their countries. The term ‘sustainability skills cafés’ is based on an interpretation of sustainability in the social sense which is centred on the ideas of community resilience, connection and cohesion, and is viewed in contrast to its more commonly understood environmental interpretation (Beasy, 2018). University of Tasmania researchers trialled the concept in Tasmania through Northern Early Years Group, supported by a small local council grant.

Seven free Skills 4 Kids Cafés were held each month at the Northern Children’s Network in their outside school hours care space. The social sustainability focus was on increasing intergenerational learning between young children and older members of the community who participated as volunteers, helping young children develop independence as well as social and language skills.

Tasmanian trial

The cafés presented children with a range of experiences and activities: arts and crafts such as clay, wool, painting, music, storytelling and reading; and imaginative play indoors and outdoors, incorporating open-ended materials such as building blocks. Some volunteers brought along activities that were personally meaningful; for example, one introduced a button box so children could sort and match the various buttons. In addition to developing skills in identifying patterns, classifying and counting, this activity enabled the volunteer to share her personal history—by talking about buttons from her Air Force uniform, for example.

Cafés were attended by educators and children from local early learning centres, with two particular centres attending regularly. Groups of up to eight children were accompanied by at least two educators from their respective centres. Overall, the number of children who attended each café ranged from eight to 23. The number of volunteers attending each café ranged from six to 12 adults. These volunteers, some of whom nominated themselves as ‘retirees’, held between them many years of experience in the health, social services and education sectors. The adult-to-child ratio was considerably higher than the ratio often experienced at

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the centres. Educators and volunteers alike saw these ratios as enabling sustained interactions between children and adults.

**Enjoyable and educational**

Educators from the centres were invited to complete a short (one page) evaluation survey at the end of each session. Ratings and reflective comments were made about their participation, social benefits, sustainability learnings, and enjoyment of the cafés. Overall, the predominantly female full-time educators said they met new people through attending the cafés and enjoyed the experience (average rating of 5.5 on the 7-point Likert Scale). The opportunity to interact with and alongside community members willing to share a range of targeted child- and adult-oriented skills was highly regarded by the educators, according to their survey responses and anecdotal evidence.

Comments from the survey suggest that educators benefited professionally from attending the sessions in two ways, firstly through the opportunity to network with other educators and gather ideas to take back to their centres. Some of the comments suggested the cafés were useful for ‘gathering activity ideas for use in ... childcare-centred activities’ and ‘engaging in the learning experiences and having professional conversations with the adults’.

Secondly, educators mentioned the importance of seeing children in their care enjoy the space. Comments included, ‘I got to develop close bonds with my children and see new aspects of their learning’. One respondent commented that having ‘plenty of supervision’ was key to being able to take the time to observe the children’s interactions with other people and the environment.

**Participants and observers**

While some educators were active participants, supporting children as they worked on different activities, others spent time observing children and volunteers and their interactions. Situated learning theory suggests processes of skill building are ‘subsumed into changing identities in and through membership of communities of practitioners’ (Lave, 1991, p. 64). Through the cafés, educators engaged in professional conversations with other educators and volunteers. This community-of-practitioners model enabled connections and relationships to be built in ways that might produce longer-term cultural wellbeing benefits for all participants (Emery, 2019).

In summary, the Skills 4 Kids Cafés provided educators with opportunities to carve out their own learning journey during their work hours while they were responsible for small groups of children. The situated learning enabled through the program design meant that professional development was meaningful and authentic because skill building was undertaken with the children and alongside other educators and community members.

**References**


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