

# ***'I Think It's Kind of Made Everybody a Little Closer:' A Virtual Platform Extending Parent Learning as Community of Practice***

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**Abstract:** Analysis of interviews with parents in a program for families with young children revealed evidence of Community of Practice domain knowledge and shared practice. Membership (inclusive of children and staff), relationship values, learning processes and context features were community elements experienced, and when using an online social platform. Online spaces for parents that complement offline community, continue a focus on their children, and that are 'socially secure' may foster engagement that extends learning.

**Keywords:** Parenting, Community of Practice, Social Learning, Online Communities

## **Parent learning as community**

Sociocultural perspectives on parenting recognize how domain knowledge is constructed through observation and mentorship of others, and through wider interactions with social settings, actors and systems (e.g., Marienau & Segal, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). Parenthood is also a life role that changes the conception of oneself (Azar, 2003). Shifts in identity that occur are also influenced by interactions in the parent's social context. The Community of Practice (CoP) framework (Wenger, 1998) is suitable to apply to parent social learning, particularly when parents intentionally gather in practice groups (Campbell & Palm, 2018). Theoretically, relationships of mutual engagement as a community that bind parents together into a meaningful social entity would be constructive to improving the quality of practice (Laluvain, 2008). And complementary online platforms that foster continued community engagement for parents would contribute to learning and relational benefits (Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013). One such group on which to test the CoP perspective is Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE). Throughout Minnesota, school districts offer parents and young children (Birth to 5 years) 2 hour weekly sessions in which they learn with other dyads, then separate into classes of parents or children. Continuous enrollment during early childhood years offers a context that promotes group identity. In 2017, a social engagement platform designed with ECFE parents and staff was launched (Walker, 2017). Parentopia.org is a closed platform that promotes class and site (multi-class) discussion, private messaging, and general program information. ECFE's method of parent learning through facilitated group interaction, and introduction of a novel platform for engagement offered the chance to investigate the presence of Community of Practice elements in offline and online settings.

The study engaged parents at an urban ECFE site in which the parentopia platform was collaboratively designed. Only a few parents in the current year had been involved in platform creation. The sample purposely represented site families by class membership, ECFE experience (e.g., 6 were new to the program, 6 were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year) and demographics. Parents reported between 1 and 6 children (mean = 2.7, SD = 1.7). Parent age ranged from 20-57 (mean = 35.3, SD = 1.5). Twenty five in depth, semi-structured interviews explored parents' perceptions about participation in the program and use of the platform. Interviews were conducted by trained research staff, then transcribed and open coded for sensitizing concepts related to domain, practice and community aspects using Wenger's (1998) definitions as a guide (LaRossa, 2005). Axial coding across all cases examined dominant themes. This confirmed evidence of CoP learning and identified features characteristic of this learner population and context, and explored the potentially complementary nature of the online platform.

## **Learning as Community of Practice offline and online**

Two dominant themes in *domain learning* for ECFE parents who participated in the weekly program were 1) long term goals for their children (e.g., fostering the child to be his or her best self, nurturing a well-functioning citizen) and 2) immediate topical concerns of childrearing (e.g., child health, safety, managing tantrums, technology exposure). *Shared practice* themes were 1) strategies that promote their child's development and 2) self-care and development (e.g., to not ignore stress). *Community* themes (Table 1) included membership, relationship value, social learning processes, and context dimensions. Other parents as peer learners were dominant community members mentioned, yet parents' own children, the staff and other site families figured into characterizations of community infrastructure. Parents expressed value in seeing their own children learn, were motivated to attend ECFE because of their children, and enjoyed expanding their network with parents who were less familiar, yet who share the ECFE identity. Social learning processes involved sharing and

problem solving (with peers), and observation (of children), both skillfully facilitated by professionals. Relationships provided parents with emotional and practical support, extended into other life spaces (e.g., the neighborhood, the child's school), and helped reinforce the parenting identity. The learning context was described as one of safety, consistency, inclusion and democracy.

Table 1. Community themes evident in ECFE participation and/or in engagement with Parentopia

	ECFE participation	Parentopia engagement
Themes		
Membership	Own children Class parents Staff Parents in other classes	Own children Staff Class adults Parents in other classes
Social learning processes	Mutual problem solving Skilled facilitation Directed observation	Observation of annotated images Continued class conversation 1-1 contact with staff, parents
Relationship value	Supportive friendships Diverse perspectives Extend into community, w/child Shared identity	Diverse perspectives Reduced isolation Reinforce program, class identity
Context	Trusted, safe space Supportive tone	Private, secure, safe space Supportive tone

Most parents reported logging into parentopia, reading program information, viewing and/or creating posts in the two months since launch; four had not revisited after account creation. Comments offered little on CoP domain or practice dimensions, but related primarily to community (Table 1). Parents expressed joy at seeing images of their children shared by staff, the opportunity to continue conversation or make 1-1 contact or post in class or site wide forums for personalized problem-solving. Exposure to parents in site wide postings seen supported building connections and exposure to diverse perspectives. Parents appreciated the 'socially secure' nature of the platform that maintained membership and the supportive tone of ECFE, and protected information about their children. They often compared their experiences with Facebook, which felt less hospitable.

Though preliminary and limited by one sample, analysis from the voices of a diverse group of parents suggests that a weekly program with other families can promote learning through Community of Practice principles. Intentional design and implementation of a virtual platform to facilitate parent and staff connectivity and information sharing may extend CoP benefits for learning, identity and social support that promote competent parenting. A key lies in providing parents with online spaces that are secure, feel judgment free, are easy to navigate, include staff and provide safe access to visual, annotated information about their children.

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