

## Week 10: Communities of Practice

### I. Highlights

- A. Communities of practice involve deeper, more intentional connections than just working with the same people every day. It's connecting on purpose to learn together over time.
- B. Ideal community of practice is 4-5 teachers. Group theory says group should be 8 people at the most or it will naturally subdivide into smaller sub-groups.
- C. Every group needs a designated leader/facilitator to keep us on track, make sure everyone gets heard, summarize regularly so we're all on the same page.
- D. Trust is necessary for the people on the edge of the group to move in and become active participants. Trust requires seeing each other face-to-face regularly enough.

### II. Homework

- A. Read Chapter 6 of *Inspiring Peak Performance* (the smaller textbook)

### III. Discussion from articles we read for homework

- A. Interesting information, have heard a lot of it before but the articles explained it very well
- B. Is a very strategic, intentional thing, not just people coming together at random
- C. Is becoming the trendy new thing, but isn't really a new idea
- D. Sharing of information
- E. Networking
- F. Our work is so much about collaborating with others that this is not a totally new concept to us. It feels natural. In some business groups/companies in other industries, this is a new idea.

- G. Would be a great experience for someone working alone in a family child care home, tired of reading articles alone, would appreciate the social support of other people in the same type of work
- H. Liked the intentionality about it. Working with the same people, but doing it with the intent to become a collaborative group to grow together instead of just chatting at lunch. You can grow/learn so much more by doing it on purpose instead of just falling into it by default.
- I. Paula Jordy Bloom textbook (the brown/purple one) in Chapter 6 talks about “peer learning teams” which means the same thing as “communities of practice”

#### **IV. Group Theory**

##### **A. Group size**

1. Must be 3 or more to count as a group (2 is just a pair)
2. If 12 or more, the group tends to subdivide/fracture instead of being one whole group (maybe divide by personalities, age groups, interests, etc.)
3. Magic number is 5-8 usually. 8-12 is pushing it.
4. Community of practice is best in group of 4-5. Max 8. If you want to create a community of practice on your staff, think about the group size.

##### **B. Group really needs a designated leader or facilitator.**

1. If no one volunteers or is appointed into that role, there will be someone who naturally surfaces as leader.
2. Not that that person does all the work, but does set the tone, make sure everyone gets heard, helps the group establish the ground rules, stay on task, etc.
3. Group without a facilitator is more likely to see the negative dynamics and “groupthink” that show up in group theory.
4. Facilitator helps people gel and work together positively.

### C. Positions within the group

1. A lot of groups have people who only want to be on the fringes, not actively engage in the discussions. More comfortable observing than diving in.
2. Having a bunch of people each doing their part may get the group project done, but it won't come together into a cohesive whole unless you discuss and collaborate intentionally together.
3. Periphery people may be introverts, need to feel trust and belonging in the group, believe their opinion will be valued, *then* feel confident to step in from the edge toward being more part of the group. (In order to build trust, need to be face-to-face in real meetings on a regular basis. Can't do it by email and text!)
4. Our learning and communication styles have to match/ fit well together in the group. This also helps build trust because you feel your style will be accepted and your learning needs will be met by the group's style.
5. Be sure to be extra open-minded about the quiet people's ideas. Just because they don't speak often doesn't mean they're unimportant. If they rarely speak up and then you shoot their ideas down, you'll kill their future participation.
6. Watch out for one strong personality forcing the group to agree with their own perspective. A community of practice is not about selling your idea to other people. It's about listening to different perspectives and exploring different ideas together. (Thus the need for a facilitator who can stop this dominant person from taking over.)
7. Expectation that everyone contributes to the discussion. Our comfort zone may be talking a lot or a little, but the group needs to make it not okay to just sit quietly without ever participating.

V. **What works for you as an adult learner/communicator?**

What do you need from a group that's trying to pursue deep, meaningful discussions? What strengths can you contribute to this group? (Good to start a community of practice with this dialogue when you first come together to make sure everyone's needs get met.)

- A. Dominant person: can lead a group easily, so need participation (can't stand when the others are quiet, waiting for you to contribute all the ideas/enthusiasm)
- B. Need equal work/participation by everyone
- C. Agree on ideas before we act on them (no one person can run away with it)
- D. Like to be the facilitator, but don't like to have to nag people to finish tasks (facilitator, not babysitter!)
- E. Need an opening to participate, not be overrun by talkative/dominant people
- F. Can contribute older/more mature perspective in a group of younger students
- G. Feels important to learn about the group members at the start of the project
- H. Can contribute a variety of experience as teacher in different settings, parent of multiple children
- I. Like to listen first, take in what everyone else is saying
- J. Getting better at being the moderator when there are clashes between other group members
- K. Helpful to be in a group that's on a similar level and finds the project as important as you do. Very stressful to be in a group that doesn't care about a C when you want an A and are willing to work for it.
- L. Our group's ground rules
  - 1. Everyone contributes at each stage or conversation.

2. Meet in person if possible. Communicate and participate voluntarily; don't make us drag you along. Everyone agrees to reliably do their assigned piece on time.
3. Every idea is valid and worth hearing. Don't shoot anyone's ideas down.
4. Agree to compromise when we can't agree 100%.

## **VI. Video clip: two boys playing with wooden boxes**

A. As you viewed the clip, what did you see?

1. Very creative, imaginative play
2. Following each other through action and body language, very little spoken language directing their play with each other.
3. One child was more dominant. Changed the direction of the other child's play by taking over the blocks.

B. What questions do the images in the clip raise for you?

1. Are the pillows on the end of the tunnel safe?
2. The boxes on hardwood seem slippery. Is that okay?
3. Where is this? And where can I get those blocks?

C. What core values might these images represent?

1. Let the children be creative, trust them.
2. Respect: Children were self-directed in play, not interfering in other groups' play, no one came up to disrupt the boys' play.
3. Free environment where children were free to play and explore, no adults jumping in saying "Oh, be careful!"

D. How do images connect with your own ideas about the education and care of young children?

1. The kids seem to know what they're capable of, didn't lose their balance when running across the tunnel. Shows there is trust in the children and they've had opportunities to learn their limits.
2. Feels Reggio-like: open blocks of time, open-ended materials, trusting children to discover on their own
3. Nice to have those open blocks of time that are not teacher-led, just supervised for basic safety

E. Looking at the same video through more of a teacher's lens, what resonates with you about what the children are learning?

1. Opportunities to be physical, not told to use walking feet or not to jump (since running and jumping are safe in this setting), helps them learn to trust their bodies which makes them safer
2. Valuable for them to learn to play independently, not always be told how to fill their time
3. Appreciate that they're allowed to combine materials from multiple areas

F. Do you see any evidence of any early learning standards in practice? (The things we know children should be learning at this age, what could you explain to parents is valuable here)

1. Understanding space, speed, distance, etc. when the boy in red was running from one end to the other to look for his friend who was crawling inside
2. Collaboration, communication, problem-solving when they discussed where and how to move the pieces of the tunnel
3. Developing gross motor skills
4. Creative ways to see the same materials in different ways: train then tunnel when you rotate these blocks in space

5. Physics: how much force does it take to push this ball through the tunnel?
- G. How might you document this as evidence of a child achieving a certain benchmark or goal?
1. Video or photos with description/running record
  2. Set out other activities using different materials to explore the same concept: marble runs, tennis balls in cardboard tubes, pushing each other on trikes outside, etc. to see if they can generalize the learning about how hard to push the ball through the tube
- H. Does this remind you of something you did in your classroom that links back to early learning standards?
1. Some classrooms only allow low blocks for safety, so no
  2. Some totally academic schools, no time for this
  3. We have a lot of cardboard boxes when they're available, let children crawl through them and go in/out of them
  4. Pop-up Play Hut tunnels or teepees, cruiser box, etc. for a similar experience but more ready-made, not as child-created
- I. Say that a new teacher not fully understanding the philosophy and practices of the center interrupts the boys in their play to instruct them to put the "animals" back where they belong. How do you approach the situation?
1. First, should give an orientation to new teachers so they understand the curriculum more thoroughly. Maybe new to free play opportunities, maybe different definitions of "free play."
  2. Ask her about her reasoning behind intervening. Why did it bother her? Helps us to understand where she's coming from.
  3. Offer articles to support the value of why we let them play freely

4. Sometimes helps to phrase it as, "It's confusing to the kids when they get different messages from different teachers, so we all try to handle things in a similar way. Next time, you could..."
5. Invite her to observe other teachers during free play time, or show video clips
6. Never correct her in front of the children. Do it aside afterward (as soon as possible afterward) so you don't undermine her authority with the kids.
7. Isn't a reprimand/ discipline, no safety hazards involved, but is important to have a conversation with a friendly tone. "When you see kids are playing together and nothing is dangerous, please don't interrupt them. If you'd like, you can take notes on their play and be present nearby, but let them go with it." Acknowledge there are different ways to approach the situation.
8. Start with a positive (she's trying to help), but we have a different policy here, maybe offer some articles to help, keep it positive. We're here to help if she has any questions, remind her there are no stupid questions, we're here to help her learn. Don't want to alienate her. This is a learning moment.
9. Ask her side of it, why she did it. Instead of telling her what not to do, tell her what she can do instead. (Just like with kids!) This is play we value, so we don't necessarily want to interrupt it...
10. New teachers often struggle with the idea of observing and not doing anything. Interfering is an outlet for that need to fidget/ act/ move/ participate. Helps to give her a clipboard to record observations, a camera or video camera, etc. -- something active to do. Helps her feel comfortable/ needed without interrupting the children.
11. Start the conversation positively to keep building trust so she'll be more able to hear you guidance.



## VII. Next video clip: mixed-age group of 3-5 years olds playing at the oat table.

Pretend you're a familiar supervisor visiting the classroom.

### A. How did you interpret the situation?

1. Need a teacher to be closer. Stuff happens in a second sometimes, but when it's building for a few minutes like that, the teacher should be able to detect it.
2. The table seems too crowded in that corner. The table is big enough for the four of them, but the space around it is too small.
3. Too few scoops/cups for the number of children. Try smaller scoops so they don't run into each other.

### B. What might be your questions for the teachers?

1. Where were you during this time?
2. Did you see this?
3. Were these kids together by choice or were they teacher-chosen groups?
4. Are these your usual "watch kids" or is this a new behavior for these kids? If they're the usual suspects, do you need help in figuring out how to reconfigure things so you can be closer?

### C. Same video. Now imagine we're a team of teachers in this room. Things like this have been happening more often in this room, so we've come together to discuss this issue in a community of practice. Discuss the issue to better understand what's going on. (Assume ratios are safe, can question teachers' skill levels.) Not solving it, just figure out why it's happening.

1. Does anyone see any patterns? Same kids in each case, usually at the same time of day, same part of the room, got worse after more children came or a particular teacher came or left, worse since it's become winter and we're stuck inside, etc.?
2. Are we as teachers setting up an environment that's going to limit or feed these situations?

3. Are children getting enough positive attention?
4. Are our materials and activities and furniture appropriate for our children's age group and skill level? Are we growing/adapting with them?
5. Do we have any documentation or notes about these cases? How could we record this on a chart to start to see patterns?
6. What disciplinary actions have we tried with the children when this has happened before? Did it help or make it worse?
7. Are the kids getting consistent messages (from different teachers and for different kids) about what's okay and what's not okay?
8. Do we know anything about these kids?
9. Is the environment overstimulating? Is there background music that could be cut out? Is there enough sound-absorbent material around (curtains, rugs, etc.)?
10. Is there too much furniture in this environment? Is it too crowded? Is there furniture in the way of us observing certain areas?
11. We noticed the girl with the braids was very competent at the individual Montessori-ish tray activity, then moved to a group activity and had a hard time. Which is the emphasis in this program -- individual or group? There was very little cooperation between the children in this group, so do we need to focus more on social skills?
12. Are there enough activities for the number of children present? This table looks like it's set for 2 children but there were 4.
13. Is there enough variety of activities & materials? The material the little girl used on the tray looked like the same oats as the big table. Is there enough variety to hold their interest?
14. Where are we (teachers) positioning our bodies and line of sight? How can we be closer to more areas at once, or scan the whole room more often while

- we're with a small group? How can we make sure we're not sitting with our back to any play areas?
15. Are we in sync with each other? If one is reading a story and the other is sweeping, is the sweeper scanning regularly to deal with things?
  16. Question: was there an issue at the table before the little girl came over? Is it her, or is it that a 4th child joined a small space?
  17. Is part of the room underutilized? Could we offer activities at those unused tables to expand the options during free play time?
  18. Are we trying to trust our children and not interfere? How can we get better at sensing when it's going to escalate and intervening when necessary?
  19. Are our children's social and language skills on par for their age? Are we practicing these so they know how to use their words instead of hitting when they want something? Are we showing the kids that we value using social and language skills in this room? (This video clip shows no evidence at all of teaching/respecting/modeling social skills, problem-solving or conflict resolution in this room.)
  20. Possible racial bias? Three white children and one black girl. She seems to be the one instigating things. Are we assuming she's going to be a problem? (Stereotype is black will be more aggressive.) Have the kids ever met anyone with darker skin or beads in their hair? If the kids don't have experience with other people who look different, it can cause subtle differences in behavior. Is an uncomfortable topic, but worth exploring.
- D. If we get together regularly as a community of practice to have these discussions, can challenge our thinking in different ways (go past the typical ideas), can go deeper and find new options. Getting in that habit moves the whole group into becoming a community of practice, not just a group of coworkers. Can do better problem-solving than if we just pick strategies at random and hope.

E. Conclude each meeting and take notes so there's a record from meeting to meeting. Note these things:

1. Was there something today that helped foster trust in our group?
2. What was an example where we challenged our thinking and took different points of view within the group?
3. What was my participation in this meeting? How was our overall participation level/balance? Is everyone contributing meaningfully? If I mostly listened, why? Am I confused or uncertain about this?
4. What were we successful in doing today? Going deeper into an issue to identify the problems and causes can be successful, even if we don't come to any solutions yet.
5. How did we handle group dynamics? Was everyone engaged? How did we handle things that were difficult? Did the facilitator help that chatterbox stop talking?