



Catharine Hydon

Early Childhood Consultant, Melbourne (Victoria)



When I look back to when I first started working in early childhood education and care I am ashamed to think how little I thought of the community beyond the centre—the community to which the children and families I worked with belonged. I held the work that occurred in that kindergarten program (work which I largely determined) in high regard and the things that happened for children outside that of peripheral significance. This was not because I was arrogant (maybe a little precious about the sacredness of what we did) but because my teacher education had focused my gaze on the child. The context was discussed in part but never in the sense that I was a professional among others that offered a suite of service provision to children and their families.

Never did the idea cross my mind that I was part of a community of professionals who could work together to enable the best possible start in life. My transformation to a new way of thinking about myself as an education professional and the role of early childhood services came about through my work in a children's centre in Broadmeadows (a disadvantaged community in the northern suburbs of Melbourne). The community, which I had mostly kept outside the four walls of the services I had previously worked in, forced its way in. I was constantly reminded of the context by families who would tell me of their refugee experience, of their quest to find a job, those who were working with Centrelink, and so it went. I was faced with a choice: become a professional who worked in collaboration with the community and the professionals who supported families' lives or be the captain of my own isolated silo. I chose to rethink myself and my work.

I am now deeply committed to an integrated approach—not one that looks the same everywhere and not one that is defined by the walls of new buildings—rather an approach that places children's needs at the heart of the conversation that we have as communities and works in many ways to support the delivery of a good childhood for every child. I have learnt much from working with a mix of other professionals, families and communities to develop places where children's needs are met and their voices are listened to. I have found my areas of expertise and where I can contribute to the learning of others. I am wary of simple answers and 'one-stop-shop' approaches where solutions are outlined in a stages model. I am drawn to those people and places—and there are growing numbers—who are content with the complexity of local responses and can talk strongly of the principles they use to guide their work. Integration is more than the sum of its parts. Early childhood education and care is one part, but in collaboration with others—children, families, professionals and communities—we can transform lives.