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**TEACHERS AND CHILDREN LEARNING TOGETHER:
DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS
IN A PRIMARY CLASSROOM**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
at Massey University**

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My thesis is dedicated to Olivia

Born 25 May 2006

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of a community of learners by observing the changes in teachers' and children's participation in four Year 3 / 4 classrooms. The study also explores the teachers' and children's perspectives of learning and teaching and the impact of these on the development of a community of learners. Factors enabling and constraining this developmental process are also identified. These research foci respond to a synthesis of research revealing the importance of teachers and children learning together in cohesive learning communities (Alton-Lee, 2003); a sociocultural approach that is uncommon in New Zealand primary classrooms.

Sociocultural theory also informs the generation, analysis and presentation of data. Participant observations, sustained conversations and interviews with the teachers and target children were used to generate data across three cycles of collaborative action research over one school year. Analyses of these data were made by observing the teachers' and the children's transformation of participation through Rogoff's (2003) personal, interpersonal and institutional lenses. The results of this analysis process are presented according to the lens through which the transformation was observed.

The findings showed a community of learners as comprising reciprocal connections across cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions. Transformations of the teachers' and the children's participation in these five reciprocal connections were observed as evidence that a community of learners was developing. These new forms of participation in the classroom shaped, and were shaped by, new identities as learners and teachers, new perspectives about learning and teaching, as well as new culturally authorised values and practices for learning together. Multiple factors constrained the development of a community of learners. The most pervasive constraint was the persistence of teachers' and children's traditional perspectives that prevented understanding of the reciprocity and responsivity of shared activity. A range of factors also enabled the development of a community of learners. The opportunity for professional dialogue in this collaborative action research most enabled the teachers' to develop a community of learners in the classroom: the opportunity for guided participation with teachers and peers in shared classroom activity most enabled the children to learn together.

These findings reveal the demanding, complex and mutually constituting nature of developing a community of learners in a primary classroom. The transformation of participation observed in this study provides evidence of the positive contributions sociocultural theory can make to both teachers' and to children's learning. Implications based on these findings are considered for teachers, children, researchers and education providers who together share responsibility for developing and sustaining a community of learners as accepted instructional practice in primary classrooms.

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Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.
(Christina Rossetti)

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