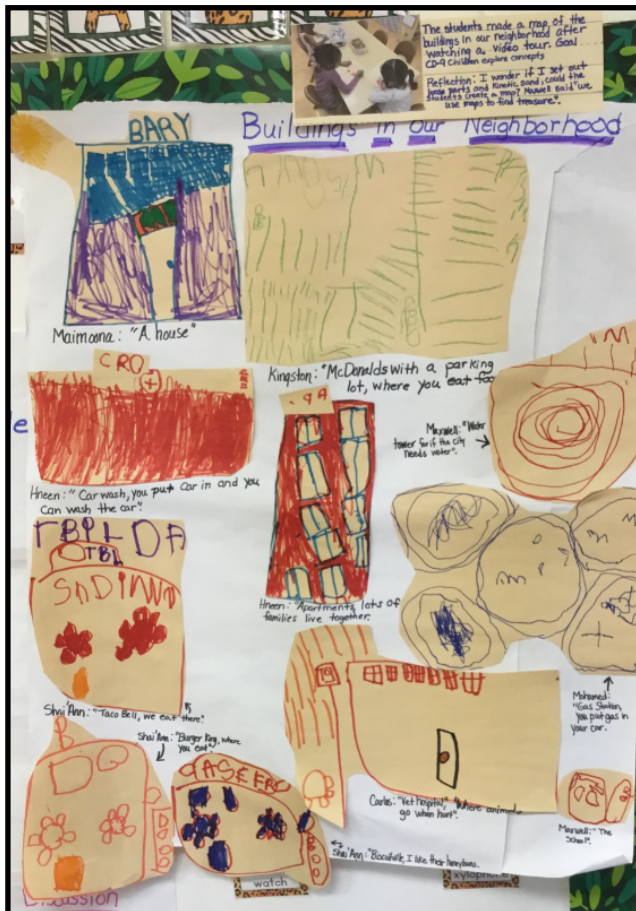


Community Connections

Establishing connections among children, families and communities, is an important focus for educators of preschool children. A savvy early childhood professional is intentional about planning and implementing strategies, opportunities, and activities that promote a sense of communal living. "Community" can be described as a group of people who live in the same place, and share any number of different characteristics. It can also be described as a feeling of friendship resulting from shared interests and goals. When we take the steps to promote a sense of unity and connectedness, the results will be a caring community of learners, (Watson, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, (1979), offers a framework for understanding human relationships and the role that environmental influences have on shaping them. This is really important when we consider the experiences that teachers plan in preschool classrooms. In correlation with his theory, family, school and local community form reciprocal relationships between the child and his environment that have an immediate and direct impact on a preschooler's social development. When children feel appreciated and valued, and are given opportunities to play, be active and have meaningful roles in their microsystem environments, they will become confident in their ability to actively contribute to the classroom community.

The National Education Association affirms the popular proverb, *it takes a village to raise a child*, and that "the whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its young people," (NEA, 2008). Teachers and schools who partner with families and communities send a powerful message to children. "It's one that says you are important. You are loved. You belong. And it's a message that, with it, holds the strength to empower every child in the world," (Children's Bureau, 2019).



After children participated in a city-wide scavenger hunt, they construct a 3-D replica of a building that was the answer to one of the questions on the list

After watching a video tour of the local neighborhood, children create a neighborhood map

Mentor Minute (cont.)

Children need many opportunities to practice the skills and dispositions that are conducive to communal living. Early childhood teachers should take steps to establish a sense of community in their classrooms, so that children can practice the principles of social competence often.

Teachers promote a sense of community in the classroom by:

- Encouraging children to share ownership of the classroom (Classroom jobs, work-it-out area, creating opportunities for children to collaborate and work together)
- Promoting interdependence by encouraging children to give and receive help from one another (Tying shoes, zipping coats, or buttoning jackets)
- Allowing the children to make group decisions by voting (Use small objects like Legos, for the children to cast a “ballot” to demonstrate the democratic process. Teachers may also want to embed math concepts)
- Learning key words related to on-going topic of study (family = familia, ball = bola)
- Creating a family bulletin board (Family displays, “Thank you Board”, “Did you know board?”)

Teachers extend classroom community with families by:

- Developing a class survey to learn about each child’s family
- Creating a welcoming classroom to children and families
- Providing opportunities for families to support their child at drop- off (sign their name, question of the day or short task)
- Providing opportunities for families and their culture to be represented in the classroom and school (photo displays, books, artifacts, languages, empty packages/containers of food items from home)
- Developing open communications with families (seek out language translations, if needed)
- Creating meaningful opportunities to connect learning in the classroom with opportunities for learning at home (Draw a picture of your family, read to your child, count the windows in your house, etc.)



Intentionally providing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among children promotes sense of community



Guest speakers from community, business, and civic organizations are invited to visit the classroom, and share their expertise. Here a classroom visitor shares a gross motor activity with the children

Mentor Minute (cont.)

Teachers promote connections with community by:

- Taking pictures of community buildings (displaying in the room/block/art/writing areas) to promote children's interest and connection to their community
- Planning trips or inviting guest speakers to classroom, seek out resources from community (take out containers/props from local restaurant, grocery store loyalty card applications/weekly sale flyers, fast food restaurants, post office, etc.)
- Seeking out and becoming familiar with local businesses in a community when visits are not possible (planned phone call from classroom, written questions from children, or teacher created pictures to share with class)
- Using the local community library as a resource. (Books related to lessons or a child's interests, books that reflect diversity, sharing announcements about free and low cost programs, community publications, and encouraging families to apply for a library card). Lowe's Building Supplies and Home Depot offer free "make and take" projects for children and their families
- Contacting businesses in the area for out dated or discontinued materials that you can use to promote learning for your children. Many times businesses will donate scrap fabric, scrap paper, trade magazines, or materials that can be used for loose parts activities
- Considering opportunities for interacting with residents of nursing homes, or assisted living facilities. (Children can draw pictures, write notes, or even have play dates with them)
- Checking with civic groups about volunteer opportunities that may benefit your students (Groups like gardening clubs, Girl Scouts, or high school organizations may share their time and talents in your classroom.)



Monthly "play dates" with residents at assisted living facilities in the community



Field trip to Master Gardener's program at Guilford County Extension Service; partnership with Sedgefield Garden Club

Resources:

- Children's Bureau website , 2019. Benefits of community involvement in early childhood.
- NEA Policy Brief, 2008. Parent, family, community involvement in education.
- Watson, M., 2017. Exploring the concept of community in relation to Early Years practice.

Please be sure to also visit the [EESLPD Useful Resources](#) tab of our website to explore the Community Connections section under Mentor/Evaluator Additional Resources

Special thanks to Angela Wilson whom served as a guest contributor to this month's Mentor Minute