



Centre for Rural Communities Inc.

Stories my community told me

Children are at the heart of community life
- the motivation for planning vibrant
futures - also the most vulnerable in times
of stress.

This project sought community-based
ideas about family and child-focused
issues in East Gippsland.

We found people needed places to meet.

We found that it took time for people to
begin to work together.

We listened to their stories.



Communities for Children
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contents

- **The project**
- **The brief**
- **Centre for Rural Communities**
- **Place-based planning**
- **Our approach**
- **Objectives**
 - **Identify common themes across communities.**
 - **Map experiences, visions and strategies of communities through the voices of community members**
 - **Facilitate processes to welcome new families**
 - **Invest in learning to inform the development of strategies for the Communities for Children project**
 - **Identify opportunities to improve access to children and family services**
- **What we learnt**
- **Final thoughts**
- **Resources**

the project

In 2004, the Australian Government through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy informed Kilmany UnitingCare that the East Gippsland local government area had been chosen as a site for a *'Communities for Children'* strategy. Kilmany UnitingCare was selected as the facilitating partner for the project.

The aim of the strategy is to improve the health and wellbeing of families and primarily, the health, wellbeing and early development of young children in the East Gippsland local government area.

A core component of the *'Communities for Children Program'* is the establishment of community partnerships to assist in the achievement of identified outcomes.

the brief

As the facilitating partner, Kilmany UnitingCare in partnership with East Gippsland Shire Early Years Committee, invited community organisations and relevant institutions to meet with them and discuss ways to best resource East Gippsland's diverse communities. The Centre for Rural Communities took up that invitation.

centre for rural communities

The Centre for Rural Communities (CRC) has been a pioneer in developing, delivering and evaluating projects that facilitate the inclusion of local knowledge into policy and planning. This work has been accredited by a major University and three TAFE Institutes. [see www.ruralcommunities.com.au for more information.]

With over 10 years experience in community place-based planning, the CRC has established:

- a network of skilled local facilitators across East Gippsland
- a ready framework of theory and practice, able to embrace new projects incorporating local ownership
- an knowledgebase of local skills, networks, history and assets
- accredited skills and education programs at both post-graduate (workers/managers) and TAFE levels (community members) with flexibility to incorporate aspects of Adult Community Education.
- credibility with regional institutions such as local government, community organisations, indigenous communities, children's services and employment agencies
- a range of real employment opportunities in rural communities
- communication networks with communities as they develop their local plans and ventures.

Community plans form the basis of constructive relationships with regional organisations and agencies.

Together, the CRC and Communities for Children - East Gippsland developed **Stories my community told me**– a place-based approach to community engagement.

place-based planning

The request for a 'facilitating partner' rather than a project 'manager' is an important and welcome shift in framing such projects, recognising that external 'command and control' is no longer appropriate and that community engagement in planning is ultimately more effective.

This movement towards locally driven partnerships is a laudable response to the reality that family and children's services were becoming less and less accessible to those that needed them. Limited access to services; limited facilities; over-regulation; crisis driven consultation; non-inclusive planning - all reflected an imperfect fit between supply and demand for services - which, if you think about it, reflects a break down in two-way communication - 'suppliers' not asking or listening well enough, and 'demanders' not talking enough.

CRC experience indicates that communities that learn to work and plan together - *and are resourced to do so* - develop more sustainable, long term plans for their communities and are actively engaged in their implementation

But working together is not as easy as it might sound. Communities and individuals are frequently under pressure. Research of past successful programs had identified nine key strategies that contributed to local ownership and long term change. These strategies named 'Collaborative Engagement' (Sheil 2000) have been designed into a study circle kit 'Building Rural Futures through Co-operation' (Sheil 1997) enabling community members the opportunity to develop trust with each other and relevant organisations. To access relevant tertiary education and better utilise resources in ways that local people value.

Change requires transformation at many levels.

Education has a major role in the process of change.

The dream of the CRC is to work in co-operation with Adult Community Education providers, the TAFE sector and Universities to provide access to resources and professional development for community members and facilitators in East Gippsland's rural communities.

our approach

We believe that local stories can inform place-based planning if a sequenced use of these strategies is facilitated by a skilled facilitator, bringing together diverse views and enabling communities to find common ground. Children are frequently that catalyst.

Developing ideas and plans through roundtable conversations [stories] - **led by a skilled facilitator** - produce powerful, locally satisfying results.

Collaborative Engagement:

- As outlined in the Professional Development manual, there are 9 crucial steps in the process of collaborative engagement
- Without all the steps, outcomes do not fulfill our expectations
- The experience, skill and confidence of facilitators has an effect on the quality of the process, and thus the outcomes of the project.
- Issues are challenging and complex – they demand skilled facilitation



Skilled facilitators:

- create a climate of co-operation and support
- allow new insights and an understanding of other perspectives
- spark new ideas, or discover a new forum for existing ideas.
- attract 'new blood' to the table – beyond the usual suspects
- celebrate the old ways, local knowledge, local resources and local traditions – and open the way for new energy.
- aspire to real solutions without duplication and bureaucratic overheads.
- Foster local ownership

Sharing stories:

- provides opportunity for personal growth
- gives an intellectual rigour and validity to 'common sense'
- empowers individuals to take more control of their own lives
- allows us to challenge myths and stereotypes
- provides a new platform for groups to meet on welcoming territory
- makes us realise what is possible through action – the importance of first steps.
- Reminds us of the value of regular reflection – what worked and how we can do things better in the future

Standout positives:

- local, *professional* jobs for facilitators
- local knowledge is valued
- local people + training = new skills = building blocks for the future

Value of local facilitators

From a regional perspective, CRC supports the employment of local facilitators able to create a learning environment leading to partnerships between groups, between communities, between communities and organizations - not dependency.

- Study Circles are accessible across the region.
- Small groups (ideally around 10-12) meeting, talking and working through the Study Circle Kit over 10 weeks –12 weeks led by a trained local facilitator
- The network of Study Circles is supported by a regional coordinator.

Our strategy facilitates community members and relevant organisations working together to improve early childhood health, development and wellbeing by:



increasing communication amongst community members regarding local issues and the early years



increasing skills, knowledge and confidence in communities to develop community plans inclusive of children and families.



enhancing the capacity of rural communities to be socially, environmentally and economically sustainable to improve the wellbeing of families and children

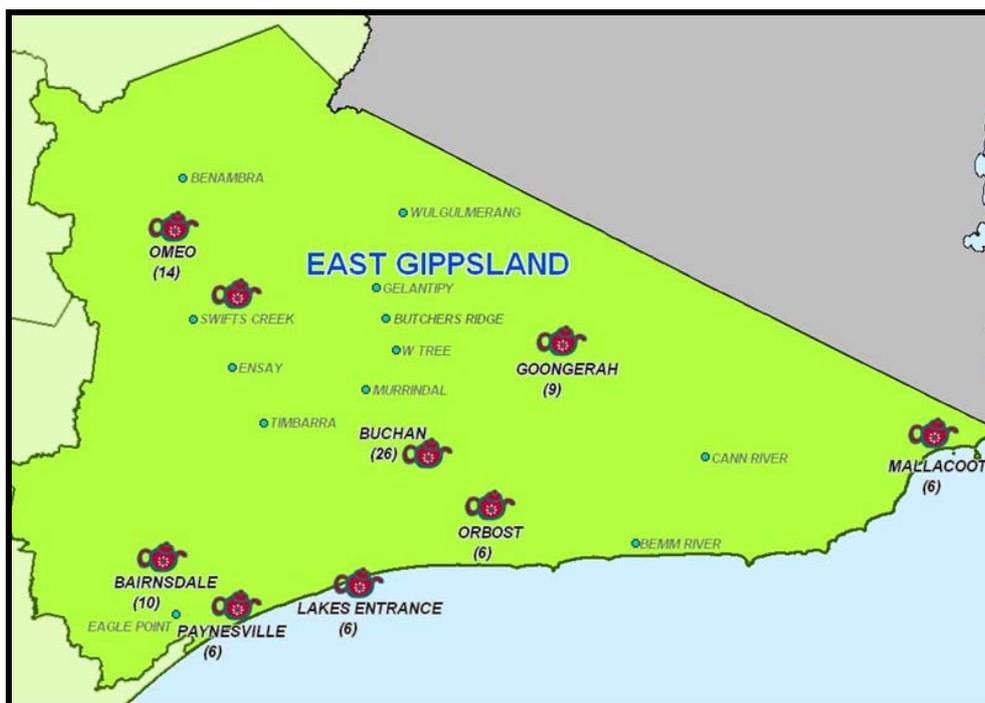


improving opportunities for local people to explore issues relating to children and families enhancing opportunities for local people to determine the future direction for the families of young children.

east gippsland

- 40,000 people across 20,000 sq. kilometers
- Mix of regional centres, regional towns and large number of small isolated communities with populations of between 50 – 2000.

Each community has a unique landscape, population and history. Everyone in them has a story to tell. Historically approaches have targeted particular groups of people in particular communities. CRC recommends a process to include all communities in the region and all people.



East Gippsland Study Circles

This map shows the location  (and size) of Study Circles established under the **Stories my community told me** project.

 Buchan	 Swifts Creek	 Goongerah	 Paynesville
Paul Harper x2 Buchan, Buchan South, The Basin, Timbarra, Gillingal, Murrindal, W Tree, Butchers Ridge, Gelantipy, Wulgulmerang and Seldom Seen.	Bruce Smith, James Hill x2 Omeo and Benambra, Bindi and Omeo Valley, Swifts Creek Community Centre and Ensay.	Fiona York Goongerah and Cabanandra also combined	Judy Ireland x2 Raymond Island and Eagle Point Bairnsdale
Families found the Buchan Resource Centre a central location and linked study circle times with other activities. Some participants travelled up to 150 kms a round trip to participate.		Meetings held in private houses to provide a warm venue for families with children in the winter months as short days and cold temperatures make the hall less welcoming	Paynesville Community Centre EastVic Professional Therapies - Bairnsdale
 Orbost	 East Bairnsdale	 Lakes Entrance	 Mallacoota
Michelle Theobald Orbost and Marlo	Jo Nunn	Di Rumble	Naomi Gordon

Objectives

So, how did CRC work to fulfill the program's objectives ?

1	Identify common themes across communities
2	Map experiences, visions and strategies of communities through the voices of community members
3	Facilitate processes to welcome new families
4	Invest in learning to inform the development of strategies for the Communities for Children project
5	Identify opportunities to improve access to children and family services

1. Identify common themes across communities.

See Table: Common themes across communities

2. Map experiences, visions and strategies of communities through the voices of community members

The **Stories** project brought people together who had not known each other, but quickly established areas of shared interests despite their different backgrounds, perspectives, age, ethnicity, education or income.

Study Circle snapshots reveal the diversity of stories gathered:

 Buchan and district	 Omeo and district	 Goongerah	 Paynesville
<p>Group 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 15 women 18 -36 yo - all have children under 5 - 7 have children over 5 - 2 are single mothers - 13 have partners. - 12 Health Care Cards - 6 have tertiary quals - 3 are studying part time. - 5 work part time <p>Group 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a mother with twins - 3 grandmothers - 2 look after their grandchildren on a semi-regular basis. - 1 is the districts' surrogate grandmother. - None are paid for these services. - 8 have Health Care Card. - 3 have tertiary quals - 3 left school at 14. - 1 works p/t in Buchan - 4 are looking for work. - 5 need regular child care (to work etc.) - 1 studies part time. 	<p>Members of the Omeo group come from Omeo, Benambra, Bindi and Omeo Valley.</p> <p>There are eight participants, the majority are young parents with preschool aged children.</p> <p>Swifts Creek/Ensay</p> <p>Members of the Swifts Creek study circle became involved in projects to beautify the town landscapes and create a Secret garden at Swift's Creek kindergarten through Local Initiatives Grant and Remote Family Services. The Friends of the Creek continue as a credible community group</p>	<p>Goongerah has a population of about 60. There are no shops, no TV reception and intermittent radio reception.</p> <p>The Goongerah Study Circle proved a good mix of interests across nine members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 participants had recently moved or retired to Paynesville/Raymond Island/Banksia Peninsula area - many had misgivings about moving away from strong social networks and family, such as ageing parents and young grandchildren. - 2 participants had lived with an alcoholic husband and reared children as a single parent. - The importance of a parent just being there to share, play, support and comfort children was discussed, and the fact that in some families these basic things are missing.
			<p> East Bairnsdale</p> <p>East Bairnsdale Early Learning Centre. Newcomers to Bairnsdale welcomed the opportunity to meet together and learn about their new community and child-friendly activities. The Community Stories Exhibition provided a focus for stories and art.</p>

 Orbost	 Bairnsdale	 Lakes Entrance	 Mallacoota
<p>There were 6 women in the Orbost Study Circle. 'Women on the Move' - they are a diverse group with common - and varied - interests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a single mother with an "alternative lifestyle" with a 3yr old • a mother of 3 children under 5yrs who has been an active business woman but is now a full-time mum • a married lady who has no children but with a passionate interest in youth issues • a man in his eighties who has raised 9 children and continues to be an active community volunteer. 	<p>The Lakes Entrance group began through personal contacts with young parents including Indigenous families.</p> <p>Formal networks had few links with this group and word of mouth proved more successful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • single parent • a newly appointed preschool president • a recently arrived parent born in Thailand • a retired woman with experience working in the community • a retired home day care worker who is a mother and a volunteer • a mother of two young children who previously worked as a teacher.

"The study circles acted as a catalyst to generate interest, confidence and a pathway to positive change".

"A locally owned, locally directed and locally relevant program is *rare* but *vital* to positive, long lasting, and enjoyable community engagement."

- Buchan facilitator 2007

Local experiences, strategies & outcomes



At first, study circle discussion often focused on issues, concern, anger, frustration, protection, distrust.

But on-going skilled facilitation allowed the conversation to move away from the old adversarial ways of working that often divides communities, and allowed members to focus on more positive ideas, and strategies, strengthening relationships and nurturing local ownership of future directions.

Goongerah

Common themes identified by the Goongerah group included education, employment and housing. Although anticipated 'outcomes' did not occur immediately, most felt the experience to be valuable - learning facilitation skills, the need for ground rules and recapping - they became more confident to speak in a group.



After the official 'end' of the study circle, participants suddenly became extremely active - the community group G'DAEE became a vehicle for Study Circle ideas and other projects. They include:

A bike track. Off-road and running the length of Goongerah, to enable safe access for children to get to school, as well as residents and tourists. It would include interpretative information on the surrounding forest and history of the town. An emphasis on using local knowledge and local people to build the track would provide employment. A range of partnerships resulted in \$55,000 being allocated to employ a local person. Two community walks, attended by 30 people identified the route.

Family Fun Day. An event to bring the community together: a market emphasising locally made produce; BBQ; children's activities; and construction of a community banner.

Childcare. G'DAEE received funding from C4C Local Initiatives Project to facilitate education for 3 local people. This could be for Certificate III in Children's Services to improve childcare options within the community. There has also been progress on the after school care through the Goongerah School Council.

Buchan

Lack of childcare delayed the start of the Buchan group and became an immediate focus. Initially there was frustration, even anger over the urgent need to improve family services in the district.

As the group progressed through the study circle kit an awareness and mellowing took place.

The group organised an information session "Services available to Young Families in the Buchan District". Attendees became aware of the mutual frustrations and that communication among strong partnerships was the way forward.

Remote Family Services responded to increased need at the Buchan Kindergarten, a supported playgroup was funded for two years and C4C supported fun days for under 5's.



Bairnsdale

Central: Parents noted that the Bairnsdale maternal and child health centre did not have toys, books or anything that could help amuse young children whilst waiting for appointments.

The Director of Family, Youth and Children's Services at Gippsland Lakes Community Health Centre was interested in listening to ideas from the study circle. She attended a meeting and talked about the plans for the new centre, where she acknowledged some failings of the old facility and the differences in running a maternal and child health facility as part of a comprehensive health service facility.



The meeting was a great opportunity for people to come together and realise that sharing ideas and open communication are great ways of moving forward.

Study circle members presented ideas to help create a more child friendly environment which will be incorporated in the new maternal and child health facility such as posters on the walls, children's books, pencils and paper, durable toys that are safe for all ages, an outdoor play area and a dress up box. A dress up box was put together by the study circle as a positive gesture for the new facility. This was a great way to conclude the group, whilst also meeting the study circle objective of making their community more family-friendly.

East: This Study Circle was a way for a small group to discuss life in Bairnsdale - and how families could be better supported. Improvement of library facilities and range of books and resource materials emerged as a priority. The group applied for funding to bring a story teller and artist to the area.

They are keen to initiate this activity to promote sharing of local stories. All shared their interests in raising children and their enjoyment at forming new social networks.

Paynesville

All participants identified a desire to get involved, or remain involved in the community - and to 'give something back'. Joining the Study Circle was seen as one way to do this.

The Paynesville group focused on helping people connect with the community by developing a welcoming brochure subsequently produced via partnerships with the Apex Club and the East Gippsland Shire.

One member was acknowledged as a wealth of knowledge for things not commonly known and 'local wisdom' helped to personalise the information.

Omeo and Swifts Creek

A constant concern of this group, was the lack of full time child care in the district and the impact this has on keeping staff at the local school and hospital. Funding for a feasibility study for a Children's Centre in Omeo has been secured.

Members of the study circle quickly formed a partnership with other community member to move this project forward. This increased credibility has been acknowledged by regional, state, commonwealth organisations and local groups. The Country Fire Authority has offered land to support the building of the Centre for the community.

Visiting children's services to Ensay, Swifts Creek, Omeo and Benambra report greater levels of co-operation and willingness to work together between all these groups since involvement in the study circles.

Despite extremely difficult conditions through natural disasters, the community expresses optimism and support for this venture. These people are in urgent need of flexible child-care to support their involvement.

Lakes Entrance

The Lakes Entrance group began by compiling a scrap book of activities and groups that they found interesting. The scrap book expanded over time as young mums discovered more activities where they would be welcome. As a project in working together they decided to hold a celebration and made and decorated a cake designed as a sailing ship.

Life was precarious for some of these parents and attendance was frequently interrupted by demands on their time and where they were living.

Orbost

Sharing stories about other communities led the Orbost group to reflect on great Orbost projects such as the Exhibition Centre, the Rainforest Centre, the Mosaic Pathway, Forest Park beautification and the Wilderness Bike Ride. These experiences led to a stronger sense of unity, ownership and pride. Newcomers welcomed hearing of these stories. But the lack of informal child care made it difficult for parents to attend the group on a regular basis.

The dream of a place that welcomed women and children became a focus for the group. The group are hopeful of linking with the state initiative in Capacity Building. They are planning a workshop to share their skills and knowledge in the Spring.



Mallacoota

Mallacoota Study Circle identified community strengths as a place that was safe for families, a clean environment, a caring community and a strong capacity to achieve projects. However, some women felt isolated from the support of extended families during children's early years.

The local playground was seen as inadequate. Improving the public playground to become safe, comfortable and enjoyable for all to use became a goal of the group. The group developed a plan for the playground and contacted the Shire.

Individuals reported improved communication skills with their families, each other and the broader community.

Community voices

Facilitation can be a complex and challenging task – for some this was a new role and in the beginning they saw their role as championing issues for sections of the community rather than being an educator for community members.

However, when facilitators were able to introduce democratic ways of working – changes were dramatic in the 3 months of the study circle.

While the specific experiences and outcomes varied from group to group – there was a clear thread throughout the participant feedback that this process offered something new, something different, something empowering:

- **Interested in idea of group of people getting together and think about things together without getting things becoming stuck. Not influenced by old hierarchy.**
- *We have moved past confusion to doing concrete things. People finally get it –because they are able to say it differently – they share the responsibility in understanding.*
- **Opportunity to become actively involved democratically influencing decisions in community and meet more people.**
- *We were all interested in contributing in some way to our 'local community' so it was important that we all come as members of that community and work within that environment.*
- **Needed someone familiar with the region and how/where a small group such as ours could fit in or have an influence in community development.**
- *The whole experience [has been valuable] – meeting new people, sharing ideas, achieving a task – and watching the way the group evolved and solved road blocks – has contributed to my ability to work within groups. And I have found out an enormous amount about my 'new' community.*
- **How outcomes are achieved through discussion and planning and doing that successfully as a group.**
- *Recognised that we can come up with an idea and make it happen (bike track – lot safer /social for people)*
- **Just getting together in a group without booze.**
- *For 2 to 8 years no progress - till now (Grants from State Gov. Goongerah in loop and DVC and Shire workers visit regularly!)*

3. Facilitate processes to welcome new families

Study circles establish a respectful environment that values the life experiences of all participants.

This co-operative approach enables participants to become aware of their common experiences or shared interests.

The changing demographics within many communities motivated groups to improve or update information on groups and activities in their localities.

The Paynesville Group was a striking example of how collaboration, local partnerships, valuing local knowledge and local project 'ownership' can work to make communities more welcoming.

Their group focused on helping people to connect with the community by developing a brochure. One member in particular was acknowledged as a wealth of knowledge for things that are not commonly known.

The group chose to include statements of local wisdom to personalize the directory – eg "If this list doesn't include what you are looking for:

- Call in at the Paynesville Op Shop and ask one of the friendly volunteers."
- "Have you asked your neighbour?"
- Visit the Paynesville Neighbourhood Centre Mon to Fri
- Try the Paynesville business and library centre
- Contact the local community radio station
- Check with the office staff at your local school

In a similar vein, the Lakes Entrance group compiled a scrap book of family friendly activities. While these projects need to be resourced for maximum distribution they are most useful when they are created from deep local knowledge.

4. Invest in learning to inform the development of strategies for the Communities for Children project

The study circles became a focus for information sharing enabling other project partners in the Communities for Children project to share their expertise and resources.

The Buchan story

At the first Buchan study circle all 15 participants had children under 5. The lack of childcare delayed the commencement of the Study Circle by two months and remained part of the group's focus.

At the initial meetings there was frustration, even anger over the urgent need to improve children and family services in our district. A lobby group, meetings with politicians, journalists, etc. was voiced as the 'way to get things done quickly'. There were even comments of *"Why can't some of this \$3.3 million simply be spent on more child care services instead of meetings, surveys and brochures?"*

As the group worked through 'the kit' and their confidence both individually and as a group increased, so did their desire to be properly informed. The challenge was to overcome individual isolation and to broaden the individual's scope of friends and contacts with young families.

As the group worked through 'Prioritising the Barriers' it became obvious that despite individual's diverse backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances they were united in their identification of and a desire to overcome the six issues identified that limited their involvement in the group.

- Child care – Regular.
- Child care – Emergency & after hours.
- School holiday programs.
- No network of young families.
- Bush Nursing Centre closed on weekends.
- No mobile phone coverage.

From the Supportive Strategies section the group was able to focus the strengths and desires of individuals in to a realistic and achievable goal. As individuals these issues were too difficult to tackle. This section focused their desires to see the group increase their knowledge of services available in relation to Issues 1 to 3 and gain the skills necessary to increase their options.

- *"You're a real ideas person".*
- *"You know how to talk in public".*
- *"You're really good at writing stuff".*

No one was left out. They began to recognise that each participant had skills valued by the group and the community. They felt that they had the energy to improve their child care services.

The discussion from the Activity section allowed for a great deal of information sharing, but no one could give a definitive assessment of what services were available. All agreed that they needed to know what is already available.

An information day was organized with a focus on “Services Available to Young Families in the Buchan District”. Guests included representatives from Kilmany UnitingCare, East Gippsland Shire, Remote Family Services, Family Day Care and Playgroups Victoria. Each guest was invited to speak about the services offered by their organization and then over lunch questions and experiences were shared.

As the group progressed with its journey through ‘the kit’, an awareness and mellowing has taken place.

Through talking, learning and cooperation the group discovered a bigger picture than just Buchan and that ‘quick fixes’ of the past do not necessarily lead to an improvement in the future.

They now agree that time, planning, cooperation and consultation – while lengthy in their process – will often lead to a far more positive and long lasting solution in the future.

Far from deserving criticism, our delivery service organizations are often as frustrated as us and if we value each other and work openly and closely together a cooperative approach can lead to a long fruitful and satisfying partnership that will strengthen community’s futures.

The information day culminated in:

- A better understanding of services available.
- Building positive relationships between service providers and the community.
- Improved Remote Family Services children’s programs at the Buchan Kindergarten.
- Federal Government funding for a Supported Playgroup in Buchan for two years including funds and training for a coordinator.
- Funding through Communities for Children for excursions and ‘fun days’ for under fives and their families in the district.

I was proud and privileged to be part of this meeting that was friendly, relaxed, informative and educational because it was held in an atmosphere of mutual respect, cooperation and a desire from all to strive for a better community for our children.

More learning benefits

Across the region, Study circle participants noted other benefits of their involvement in the project:

learning how to use different networks

- learning to share and support others in developing leadership skills
- feeling a sense of empowerment
- education on the issues that affect young children
- meeting people you would not normally meet
- having time out from the kids and an opportunity to think
- having an opportunity to participate in a community project.

All the participants were enthusiastic about this opportunity that enabled them to think in different ways, to listen, to share, to learn and to feel empowered.

STORIES MY COMMUNITY TOLD ME

Dr Helen Sheil, Neil Smith & Andrea Lane | Centre for Rural Communities Inc.
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5. Identify opportunities to improve access to children and family services

Paynesville study circle

all (participants) identified, in various ways, a desire to get involved or remain involved in the community and to give something back to the community. Joining the study circle was seen as one way to do this.

The main issues identified included a lack of accessible information for new residents, poor planning of the foreshore area (it has a playground with no fencing or shade), a lack of walkways and paths for bikes, prams and wheelchairs and a lack of a focus for the 'heart' of the community and the 'town centre'. A desire for the community to be a plastic bag free environment, a need for a 'men's shed' and no public baby changing facilities.

'Visions' for the future included:

- Providing information for new residents that is readily available, to help people 'connect' and feel a part of their new community.
- Making the playgrounds safe for children by building fences and shaded areas.
- Setting up more baby changing facilities.
- Developing a 'Community Plan' document which can act as a reference for future study circles or other groups.

The group took action by:

- sending a letter to have a foreshore playground developed by the Lions Club, which subsequently handed the project over to the Shire who will be putting in new equipment, shades and fencing
- meeting with the coordinator of the neighbourhood centre to discuss ideas to make it appear more outwardly welcoming and less corporate
- meeting with the Shire to discuss a range of issues including directory information that is currently available and options/support for updated and localised information
- consulting those who developed the 'Nowa Nowa Community Plan' to get some ideas for a future plan for Paynesville.
- liaising with the local 'schools as hubs' group who are working on a more targeted directory of services for young families.

Participants commented that they had learnt new things about their community by being a part of the process, and that while a lot of time was spent talking about issues, this was imperative to future planning. One participant said:

The study circle process was very interesting. Initially I just wanted to have something tangible to do, rather than spend so much time working through all the various personal agendas. But I found that once a project had been agreed to, it became hard work. In retrospect, it was very invigorating and stimulating to listen to others and to come to a consensus about what we could tackle. The group dynamics were fascinating.

Contacts made through the study circle also has helped me get some part-time work.

According to the facilitator, it was a rewarding process because all members of the group were self motivated. The group is planning a celebration get-together in September and participating in the Community Stories exhibition.

Omeo study circle

Members of the Omeo group come from Omeo, Benambra, Bindi and Omeo Valley. There are eight participants, the majority are young parents with preschool aged children. Arrangements for childcare for these parents is organised and working well.

The study circle has already made progress in developing a set of dreams and ambitions, and has managed to make one of the dreams happen, simply by being together and sharing their local knowledge. A future dream of the group that is currently being explored was described by the study circle facilitator:

It would be great to be able to have a heated pool for mothers and babies/toddlers to access as the nearest was thought to be Bairnsdale. One group member who works at Dinner Plain said that they are just building an indoor heated pool there. Another member thinks that we could arrange a bus to take locals (old and young) up to the new pool, especially in the eight months when there is no snow and Dinner Plain is very quiet. The group has decided to make some further investigations and report back next week – smiles all round!

What we learnt

Contribution of Early Years programs

Local conversations had synergies with international research on importance of Early Years programs in rural areas. *'Importance of quality for children central – 'safe environment promoting child care as well as learning. Learning should be broadly based, fun and free from pressure with strong 'educational' component in pre-school years. Personal development and social skills of particular importance in sparsely populated areas (Shucksmith 2006 : 685).*

Lack of childcare

Recent policies limit access to childcare and the availability of qualified workers for rural communities. This had a significant impact on many aspects of the program and life in East Gippsland – limiting participation, learning opportunities and work opportunities.

Local facilitators – key to embedding local knowledge

Core to our approach is the employment of local facilitators for all the reasons outlined – local knowledge, skill building, establishing career paths, enabling local learning, strong networks, local ownership.

It is the task of the facilitator to link personal experiences into learning strategies, programs and universal policies. To assist local people care for the places in which they live.

Full time – regional co-ordinator essential.

The network of facilitators needs co-ordinated support to keep them motivated, and informed.

Facilitators with their varying skill level and diverse experience benefit from sharing their own stories, mentoring, and liaison with stakeholders.

The level of community ownership is the key indicator of success

In communities where facilitators created a learning environment, ownership remained in the community for the long term. Others needed more support to make this transition.

Outcomes exceeded expectations

- Partnerships between individuals
- Partnerships with organizations (Omeo Country Fire Authority providing land for Children's Centre, Omeo Hospital, Remote Family Services)
- Strong support from local, state and commonwealth government and community based organizations.
- Goongerah had been 'out of the loop for the last 8 yrs – now has partnerships with DSE (\$55,000, Shire – DVC, CRC, TAFE, Remote Family Services)
- Paynesville has developed partnerships with Shire, Apex and Community Centre
- People returned to work and study.
- Buchan developed strong connections with Playgroups Victoria, Family Mentor Program, Exchange cultural program with Bali (Second Site initiative) Remote Family Services, Shire, social activities.
- Omeo and District and Swifts Creek and District enhanced their capacity for co-operation between communities for health and children's services that were previously in competition for time and funding. Trusted relationships now evident.

Importance of celebration – Community Stories Exhibition

- Highlighted energy in communities for C4C project.
- Increased networking
- Importance of project partners emphasized.
- Positive emphasis on children's wellbeing and ways it can be resourced.
- Children's Garden at Swifts Creek
- Dress-up box
- Family Fun Days

Study Circle Guidelines

- enhanced the groups' ability to work together
- 'took time to practice' (quote from Goongerah)
- a different way of working to find common ground
- Community members welcomed learning environment.

Importance of neutral meeting places in communities

Access to relevant tertiary education – major contributor

Skill level varied enormously

New partnerships requires investment to establishing

- time
- relevant skills
- knowledge (professional development),
- new structures and
- childcare to access those most motivated,
- relevant meeting time for child-care workers
- hospitality – food
- publicity

Practical steps for future programs could include:

- \$2,000 per project towards project (wise investment evident)
- Budget for hospitality and travel – EG communities exhausted from drought, fire, flood – less able to be hospitable from home grown produce – took time to appreciate this.

Into future

Within communities

- enhanced skills contribute to smooth running of new initiatives
- sharing resources across communities
- greater levels of co-operation between communities
- access to broader range of children's services in more remote areas
- feedback on potential barriers limiting access
- relevance of child care qualifications for rural areas
- local people access skills that stay in community
- greater level of participation from within communities
- community planning
- creating sound base to link with cyclical planning
- enhanced awareness of art and stories in children's development and sense of place
- greater inclusion of welcoming spaces for children
- supporting parents within communities
- greater awareness of partner organizations

STORIES MY COMMUNITY TOLD ME

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Page Page 22 of 24

- services and programs for all children
- partnerships with EG Shire
- DVC Volunteer funding into communities
- links with capacity building programs

Disappointment

After 10 years of working in partnership – Partnership between Monash University, Gippsland Campus and Centre for Rural Communities – ceases with the end of this project.

New partners being sought

Website

Our new site is under construction at www.ruralcommunities.com.au
This site will allow us to document our work, our case studies, facilitate networking and other online opportunities.

The site is being developed using a sophisticated Content Management System which could allow us to explore more content-rich online publishing, potentially with a subscriber model, and to generate regular newsletters as well as link to relevant readings and downloadable material.

Final thoughts

The ability for children to thrive is closely linked to the capacity of their communities to care for the people and places in which they live. Consequently their welfare is a critical indicator of the state of community life. Unlike metropolitan areas, local development in rural areas is initiated by residents rather than authorities (Lahti Edmark 2004) and without an agreed upon community plan this can create problems of who sets the agenda, who defines the problem, and in whose interest does the development occur? Tensions can result from this reactive way of working that divide communities for generations.

Engaging community members in skill development to 'bring people with different interests to the same table' and find common ground, increases people's power over their own lives through contributing to awareness of social, cultural, environmental and economic situations. This process promotes civic engagement and creates a foundation from which regional groups can work and plan for the longterm.

The **Stories my community told me project** as one strategy in the Communities for Children – East Gippsland project provided an opportunity to implement this process in the interests of children and families who are at the heart of community life.

Resources

Study Circle Guidelines: [www.
http://www.studycircles.org/en/index.aspx](http://www.studycircles.org/en/index.aspx)

Study circle kit

Sheil, H. (1997) Building Rural Futures through Co-operation, Centre for Rural Communities, Churchill.

Professional development manual

Sheil, H, (2000) Growing and Learning in Rural Communities, Centre for Rural Communities, Churchill.

Stories of Gippsland study circles

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Centre for Rural Communities www.ruralcommunities.com.au