

“Network of Support” Project

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

British Columbia is on the forefront of early years community development (EYCD) activity. Since 2001 there has been a growing number of funded community tables whose specific mandate is to focus local energy and attention towards supporting families with young children. These community early childhood development (ECD) tables have many different names, titles and funding sources. The common ground, however, is *the work* of supporting families with young children through community collaborative processes.

The two initiatives that fund the majority of the early years community development positions are Children First and Success by 6. Along with the Ministry for Children and Family Development and the Human Early Learning Partnership, a provincial working group has jointly identified an opportunity to strengthen partnerships among provincial initiatives with the goal of better meeting the needs of EYCD practitioners. Doing so has the potential to increase the level of resource sharing, information coordination, and professional development, ultimately strengthening EYCD at local, regional and provincial levels. There is a shared belief that strengthening the practice of EYCD practitioners will contribute to a stronger and more sustainable system for the early years in British Columbia.

The first step of the working group towards the co-creation of a “network of support” was a review of related literature, of experiences in other jurisdictions, and of the needs identified by the BC EYCD practitioners themselves.

This review will inform and advance conversations among BC EYCD practitioners planned for November 2009.

WHAT DO PRACTITIONERS WANT?

Using an online survey, EYCD practitioners contributed their thoughts on a “network of support.” Ninety-four people completed the survey. This is an excellent response rate given that there are 79 funded ECD tables in the province.

Of the 94 respondents, 86 (89.6%) responded that they were in favour of the notion of developing a “network of support,” 0% responded not in favour, and 10 people (10.4%) were not sure.

Of the “Not sure” respondents – reasons included:

- *It has been attempted for years and there has not been a significant effect on impacting family services or enhancing community capacity*
- *Afraid the Success by 6 branding and its crucial provincial partners will be lost*
- *I feel that we have an established network*
- *Not sure I want to form another group – it is another meeting and another level of talking – we might be better to build on an existing group to be the network of support instead of forming something new*

Three overwhelming themes emerged from the respondents as to why they felt that a “network of support” was important.

1. Practitioners value **learning together** – they want to share knowledge, ideas, challenges, skills, and enthusiasm. Many expressed the need to learn and share to decrease their isolation.
2. There is a desire to **better use limited resources** (human and financial). In particular, EYCD practitioners want to avoid duplication and “reinventing the wheel.”
3. There is **strength in numbers**. A large, strong collective provincial voice gives EYCD credibility.

BARRIERS

Respondents identified the following list as being the primary barriers to receiving the support they need or the support they have to offer. Survey quotes are taken from respondents who could NOT participate in any face-to-face meetings in November.

1. Time

I think I am only one of many ECD coordinators from smaller communities, where the ECD coordination role is only one of a number of roles we have, and it is very challenging to fit the number of things I would like to do, study, attend and be involved in within the few hours each week allotted for ECD.

2. Distance/geography

We are spread apart geographically.

3. Funding - including lack of funding for traveling to or attending face to face meetings, inequities of funding between communities and initiatives, and how to justify using limited funds on coordinator support when programming dollars were so limited locally)

It is frustrating to not be able to take part in face-to-face discussions and be in on the ground level discussions – to only be able to give feedback to an already existing dialogue – and to do so in relative isolation. I realize that there is a cost issue and no way to cover the costs ...but it is important for others to know that we would like to be included in the face-to-face conversations but are unable to.

Perception that there is more support (provincial and other) for one initiative over another.

4. Silo-thinking and silo-working, competition between initiatives, and the fear of giving up some control and identity in order to collaborate

The "turf" and "silo" ways we have become used to working.

Language – "us" and "them." Looking at different ways of operating rather than looking at the unified strengths of the whole.

5. Lack of already developed relationships among coordinators

Lack of formal links with Aboriginal Initiatives.

One barrier is to know the background of resource people in order to trust the knowledge base and experience.

6. Different methodologies and ECD table designs that make it hard to share experiences

Different communities differing needs.

Too many groups – Success by 6, Early Years, HELP...I know each group has different funding but we are all working together towards the same end – perhaps we should be thinking about consolidating resources, time and people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A wide scan of the literature available describes professional “networks of support” under three major categories: communities of practice, networks and professional associations. Each of these categories has elements that offer insight to this current project:

Community of Practice – a voluntary, informal gathering and sharing of expertise. Etienne Wenger defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.”

A Collaborative Innovation Network (COIN) is a virtual community of practice focused on developing new ideas – people usually assemble outside of organizational boundaries and across conventional hierarchies. They work together in a structure that enables a fluid creation and exchange of ideas.

Network – a group of people working towards a common goal on the basis of a common conviction or vision. A network promotes and informs evidence-based policy and decision-making. It provides members with an opportunity to exchange information, advice, and provides support in relation to evaluating action.

Synonyms often used:

- Alliances – formalized relationship between autonomous parties
- Joint ventures – business model
- Affinity groups – roots in activism

What’s the difference between a Community of Practice and a Network?

A community of practice is a group formed for the specific purpose of improving member *practice* as opposed to a network that is more relationship and outcome based.

Professional Associations – a fee-based group (also called a professional body, professional organization, or professional society) operating as a non-profit organization seeking to further a particular profession, and the interests of individuals engaged in that profession.

Overall, the literature covering communities of practice, networks and professional associations agree that there are potential benefits in the creation and maintenance of connections between practitioners. In addition to the ones already indicated by practitioners themselves in the survey, these benefits include:

- Providing a shared context for people to share information, stories and experiences
- Better leveraging of the learning and knowledge of the group
- Helping people organize around purposeful action
- Generating new knowledge to help people transform their practice
- Retaining history and knowledge in “living way” as opposed to a manual or a database

Considering the three themes that emerged from the EYCD practitioner survey and the categories noted above – the proposed “network of support” requires elements of all three (community of practice, network and professional association) to meet the needs identified by the survey respondents.

1. a group to **improve practice** among members
2. a group that provides the **relational support** needed in an isolating position
3. a group that contributes to a stronger, **collective voice** for EYCD practitioners in the province.

PITFALLS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

The literature suggests factors that support the success of a “network of support” along with specific pitfalls. These two key areas of learning are represented in the following table:

Common Pitfalls in Networks and Communities of Practices	Ways to Increase Success
Overcoming a culture of independence	Develop shared goals & objectives
*Perception that this is just another time consuming project	Provide options and flexibility for different and changing levels of participation
Maintaining energy and freshness	Interpersonal leadership – “network weavers”
*Lack of collegiality	Give people time to build relationships Balance online connections with face to face opportunities
*Trust issues between people, initiatives, and organizations	Include elements that provide participants a sense of belonging (including symbols, language, events) Reduce divisive language and promote transparent, inclusive communication

Shifting membership	Face to Face opportunities to increase trust, add personal connection, provide a sense of belonging
Technological barriers	<p>Usable technology that develops with communities level of need and comfort</p> <p>Encouraging different ways to connect</p> <p>“If there is not already a community of practice with ongoing communication, merely offering an electronic technical means to communicate is not likely to create one.” (Sharp, 1997)</p>
Can't create a community that doesn't already exist.	<p>Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ boundary – to connect with other communities ○ cutting-edge, out-of-the-box thinking <p>Being inclusive in the development of a community.</p>

* Indicates a barrier also indicated by the EYCD practitioners in the survey results.

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF EXISTING “NETWORKS OF SUPPORT”

The following case studies provide examples of existing groups that serve as either a community of practice, a network or a professional association. They provide some insight into the possibilities and limitations of any particular model.

Case Study - University led Practitioner Network University of Hertfordshire

<http://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/schools-of-study/education/early-years-network.cfm>

Hertfordshire's Early Years Advisory Team and the University of Hertfordshire's School of Education are working together to establish an exciting network for committed early years practitioners. This new venture is aimed at everyone in the early years workforce across Hertfordshire and neighbouring areas.

Membership is **free** for all Early Years colleagues from education, health and social care, training organizations, child minding – and anyone with a professional interest in young children 0-8.

Case Study – Community of Practice led by National Association with membership dues

The National Agricultural Educator's community of Practice,

<http://www.naae.org/membership/commofpractice/> is an online networking site, like Facebook, but has a greater emphasis on professional sharing of information and resources.

This Community of Practice is one arm of a larger association with paid membership, staffing and annual conferences. It aims to maintain connections between conferences, keep practitioners current, and offers a mechanism for them to share ideas and challenges.

There is a short, engaging video used for education and promotional purposes.

http://www.naae.org/links/resources/cop_promo.mp4

Case Study – Online Collaborative Innovation Network

The Metropolitan Hamilton Collaborative Innovation Network was developed to facilitate transformational thinking in public and private initiatives. It is an open social network (online only) promoting “collective transformational learning.”

Note: last online activity was August 31st and very few posts have occurred.

<http://metrohamilton.ning.com/page/about-us>

Case Study – Non-profit led Practitioner Network

Educator Support Network is a teacher support network based in the UK. It is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to providing practical and emotional support to teachers. A branch of this Network began in the United States.

The former administrator responded to an inquiry with: ***“Unfortunately we were not successful in duplicating the business model of our parent organization, Teacher Support Network in the UK. ESN could not generate the funding necessary to sustain and dissolved the charity over a year ago.”***

This Network included telephone and on-line coaching, an information centre with resource information.

<http://www.educatorsupportnetwork.net/about>

Case Study – Healthy Child Manitoba,
Government funded initiative
<http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/>

Healthy Child Manitoba funds Parent-Child Coalitions and programs that are coordinated by a provincial director and 26 regional coordinators. The coordinators around the province are supported by:

- o the provincial director
- o 4 face to face meetings/conferences a year (travel is subsidized)
- o a provincial website that is undergoing an enhancement to include a blog or forum for coordinators as a result of the need to better mentor new coordinators

One coordinator shared that the face-to-face meetings are essential even though she uses electronic communication most often. She felt that without meeting other people first, she would be less likely to reach out. Working in a rural area, she feels her job can be very isolating and is strengthened by being able to both get inspired by others and to be able to share her ideas.

Health Child Manitoba is a government-funded initiative with a long term commitment. There are other funds that go to early years programming (i.e. through school divisions) that sometimes makes coordination difficult.

Case Study – Alliance, voluntary association with membership dues.

Sparrow Lake Alliance

<http://www.sparrowlake.org/index.htm>

is a voluntary association of people and organizations that have coalesced around the theme of children and youth. There is a \$45 annual membership fee that is for individuals (not organizations). This factor is one in which the Alliance feels has contributed to its longevity – “By making membership individual, the Alliance allows people who share a commitment to similar ends to remain connected, even though their organizational affiliations may require them to adopt different means to achieve those ends.”

Another success factors for the Alliance is its 3 choices of participation levels depending on time and interest. Participants can choose to be a part of annual meetings, be on specific task forces or become one of 12 Steering Committee members whose task is to shape and support the Alliance. Their membership is over 200 and extends beyond the borders of Ontario.

The website indicates that interaction among members is during the face-to-face meetings. Any online communication is self-generated.

Case Study – Early Years Institute Long Island
<http://earlyyearsinst.org/index.html>

The Long Island Child Institute is in their 7th year of connecting ECD stakeholders and ECD practitioners in their self-described geographically detached part of the United States. They represent one initiative for the whole area. Among their activities are innovated ways to keep stakeholders and practitioners connected including webinars, conferences, topic focused networks, and branding. The Institute is funded through five foundations – and are approaching the end of their 4 year plan that will require seeking further funding. Key learnings from the director to keep people connected included shared learning opportunities, common language and belonging.

When asked how the director is connected to support – the reply included a list of out of state networking opportunities that she takes the initiative to be a part of. On Long Island, she is in an isolated Early Years Community Developer position.

BALANCING ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS

It was a common thread from all the research sources, that online connections are best maintained when stimulated by periodic face-to-face interactions. When people can talk, share an experience together, and put faces to names – trust is built, relationships are strengthened, and any ongoing online connections are fuelled.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

(from Virtual Communities of Practice Initiative)

While online communication is one of the easiest ways to overcome the geographic and travel budget barriers within our province, there was not a huge appetite to use technology beyond going to a website for information or accessing people via email. There were, however, suggestions offering a starting place for people to begin to incorporate technology into a community of practice.

“we need to do more with the technologies are that available including webinars, Elluminate and others”

Using technology as a venue for learning opportunities may be more approachable than technology as a networking avenue.

Webinars allow some visual content, include interaction through email questions, satisfy learning needs without traveling, and can be conducted by EYCD as a way to share skills and expertise.

Videoconferencing provides another level of relational interaction above a teleconference or email interchange. There is a maximum size for this medium to stay effective and may be more useful for small groups (interest groups or regions).

“SB6 has a really good coordinators website. We are kept up to date on new names.”

“I would really like to see a resource guide of some sort. With connections, their info, and a guide of other resources throughout the province.”

Websites can offer static or interactive options. A database of EYCD practitioners increases the chance of people knowing whom they could reach out to. A forum allows communication through posts or chats.

BUILDING A MODEL BASED ON CURRENT ASSETS – ON THE COLLABORATION CONTINUUM

EYCD is an approach that is strength based, so respondents were quick to identify the things that currently work for them and that might have the potential of serving a greater need with some “tweaks.” These support assets, however, were not experienced consistently among EYCD practitioners. They included:

- face to face opportunities
- teleconferences
- any learning opportunity
- email
- websites
- regional connections
- provincial connections.

The survey results indicated that EYCD practitioners wanted more connections than they currently experienced, but felt that building on current assets was the way to go versus building a new, separate model of interaction. A review of current assets will be done during the November face-to-face dialogues with practitioners.

Designing a model to collaborate among the provincial initiatives requires some thoughtful dialogue about the level of collaboration and the subsequent implications of that collaboration on the individual initiatives. Using an adapted continuum of collaborative processes, EYCD practitioners will have the opportunity to reflect on where a model for a “network of support” might fall along this continuum (Ryerson University, 2007; Goldman & Intriligator, 2009; Calgary Family and Sexual Violence Sector , 2005).

CONTINUUM OF COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES (adapted)				
	COOPERATION	COORDINATION	COLLABORATION	INTEGRATION
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Narrow focus ▪ Short term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Broad focus ▪ Short or intermediate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Broad focus ▪ Long-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Broad focus ▪ Long-term
Interagency Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ None required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dictated by single agency policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Determined by the collaborative interagency structure/process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Determined by the collaborative ▪ Will have impact on single agency policies
Interagency Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May require a new interagency structure/process ▪ staff may be directly assigned to the new structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Requires development and maintenance of new structure/process ▪ staff often assigned directly to the new interagency structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Requires development and maintenance of new structure/process ▪ New structure alters single agency structures

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> staff often assigned directly to the new structure
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported with discretionary funds which remain within the control of the individual agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported with dedicated funds from individual agencies that remain within the control of the individual agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by pooled or new resources that may be largely within the control of the collaborative interagency structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by pooled or new resources that are within the control of the collaborative interagency structure
Loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loyalty is to the individual agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary loyalty is to the individual agencies Secondary loyalty is to the collaborative effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loyalty is to the collaborative interagency effort as well as loyalty to the individual agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary loyalty is to the collaborative interagency effort Secondary loyalty is to the individual agencies
Agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not an issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Majority rule voting procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consensus
Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interagency decisions made by single agencies Interagency needs are secondary to agency needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interagency decisions consistent with single agency decisions Interagency needs are secondary to single agency needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Made by the collaborative structure Single agency needs are secondary to interagency need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Made by the collaborative structure Single agency needs are secondary to interagency needs

The following information is found in: Ryerson University. (2007). Course CVIH 920, Module 1: Community collaborations in support of child and youth. Adapted from: Factors that Enhance Collaboration among Education, Health and Social Service Agencies. Paper presented at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association by H. Goldman and B.A. Intriligator, p. 9. As found in: Framework for Group Initiatives: Principles and Processes for Working Together; (2005) Family and Sexual Violence Sector- Calgary and Area. p. 48.

DRAFT AGENDA FOR NOVEMBER DIALOGUES

1. Introduction/welcome
2. Activity –EYCD – what is it and what do we do. The beginning of identifying professional practices
3. Overview of project, working group and hopes
4. Dialogue activity #1 (Strength in Numbers) – How connected are we? & How are we connected?
5. Dialogue activity #2 (Learning Together) – build on morning activity with a focus on practice

LUNCH

6. Continuum of Collaboration – how can we begin to work together as early years community developers to improve things for all?
 - a) Review continuum – definitions, outline, examples
 - b) Activity to collect thoughts, questions and concerns
7. Dialogue activity #3 (Better use of Existing Resources) – to come up with a full list of current and potential assets
8. Dialogue activity #4 – how is this going to happen?
9. Next Steps – report, recommendations based on action ideas
10. Closing

(The Nov 9th session for Success by 6 coordinators will be 2 hours so will include a limited number of the above agenda items.)

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Revised October 30, 2009

TSmyth

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<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>

Wenger, Etienne. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning as a social system*. (Online)
<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>

Wenger, Etienne. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

A VARIETY OF EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE, NETWORK AND ASSOCIATIONS

ASCD Networks http://www.ascd.org/about_ascd/Networks/Networks.aspx

BC Healthy Living Alliance http://www.bchealthyliving.ca/terms_of_reference

Canadian Policy Research Network <http://www.cprn.org/page.cfm?page=127&l=en>

Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services
<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyyears/cop.aspx>

Child and Family Mental Health – Early Childhood Community of Practice
<http://www.tapartnership.org/COP/earlyChildhood/default.php>

Child and Nature Alliance <http://www.childnature.ca/2009/10/02/fall-09-update/>

Communities of Practice for Local Government (UK)
<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/faq/faq-index.do>

Creative Partnerships <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/how-we-work/>

Early Years Institute – Long Island <http://earlyyearsinst.org/index.html>

Educators Support Network <http://www.educatorsupportnetwork.net/about>

Healthy Child Manitoba <http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/>

Metropolitan Hamilton Network <http://metrohamilton.ning.com/page/about-us>

National Association for the Education of Young Children
<http://www.naeyc.org/content/about-naeyc>

National Association of Agricultural Educators. *NAEE Communities of Practice* (Online)
<http://www.naee.org/membership/commofpractice/>

Shared Work <http://www.sharedwork.org/>

Sightlines Initiative <http://www.sightlines-initiative.com/index.php?id=54>

Social Services Improvement Agency, Children and Young People's Network
<http://www.ssiacymru.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1846>

Sparrow Lake Alliance <http://www.sparrowlake.org/index.htm>

University of Hertfordshire Early Years Network <http://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/schools-of-study/education/early-years-network.cfm>