



Using Communities of Practice to Enhance the Quality of Early Childhood Programs

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Do you want to enhance the quality of your program? Do you want to build strong communities of practice within your organization? Whether you are at a big centre, small centre, for profit, non-profit, or a Kindergarten classroom, engaging in communities of practice is a powerful professional learning approach that contributes to establishing quality programs (Carter, 2010).

Throughout this article you will learn more about communities of practice and the importance of these communities in an early childhood setting. I will refer to two centres who participated in a communities of practice pilot project for 8 weeks. Although this idea was not completely new to these centres, the pilot project was necessary to find a way to make it more consistent and effective. There were nine educators who participated in all aspects of the initiative, which included a learning session, two team meetings and self-directed professional learning experiences. These educators gave feedback throughout their experience to help strengthen the process moving forward. They also participated in two surveys to share their experience about their participation.

What is a Community of Practice?

A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact over time (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, & Carter, 1993). The community has an interest or idea they want to delve into and truly understand, which engages educators in reflecting on their practice.

Communities of practice help strengthen your image of yourself as a thinker and generator of knowledge as opposed to a consumer of other people's thinking (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, & Carter, 1993). Being a consumer of other people's thinking is normal in this day and age. What's worrisome is that educators may turn to these wonderful online ideas before truly taking the time to observe children, make meaning of these observations, and plan from these observations. This

is where communities of practice play a crucial role, as they give educators opportunities to really delve into their ideas and create an organizational culture that asks questions and focuses on the learning more than the teaching (Carter, 2010).

As we engage in communities of practice we become part of a team of reflective practitioners that uses a more solutions based approach. There are so many reasons why we can't do something. Some of these barriers are out of our control. As we engage in these communities we put a strong focus on what we can control.

Why Should I do this?

The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) in Ontario has rolled out a Continuous Professional Learning program that formalizes the continuous professional learning that educators do every day (CECE, 2018). When the College of ECE released ideas of the different ways educators can engage in professional learning, communities of practice was mentioned.

Communities of practice is one of the more powerful professional learning approaches early childhood programs can offer and when done effectively, professional learning becomes embedded in our daily practice (Carter, 2010). In the document *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, it states that "participating in ongoing reflective practice and collaborative inquiry with others is a pedagogical approach that nurtures learning and development in the early years" (Ministry of Education, 2014). Communities of practice open up opportunities to reflect on our practice and engage in collaborative inquiries.

How Do I Start?

There isn't one exact way to get started with a community of practice. Every program is different and so is how they begin to implement this into their practice. What this article offers are some steps to consider as you begin to engage in this

experience. It is important to look at your own needs as a program and come up with your own steps. These are steps that were crucial for the educators who participated in this particular experience.

Shared Understanding

It is imperative to set the stage before you set on a quest of inquiry together. You want to create a place for a positive experience by coming together as a group to discuss how to be an effective learning community. In this project, the educators came together for a session to learn more about what a community of practice is and what the benefits are. This was facilitated as a workshop but there are books and videos you can explore as a team that can help you. Consider using the book *Reflecting in Communities of Practice; A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators* (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, & Carter, 2013). This book has opportunities embedded throughout for deep reflection within yourself and with your colleagues.

Understanding Yourself

The next step was for the educators to reflect on themselves as individuals and as a team. An important question they explored was: what are their barriers to active listening. Whether it was distractions, thinking about what to say next, or having a closed mind, nearly everyone was able to think about something that they would like to work on to help establish a strong learning community. This led to some discussion about different strategies to active listening which included asking questions to seek understanding rather than giving answers and keeping a notepad close by to write down thoughts rather than interrupting.



Educators practicing active listening skills. (June, 2018)

Consider what kind of community you want to be

The next step was for them to establish what kind of learning community they wanted to be. The educators were given time

during a regular staff meeting to talk about this. Some teams focused on being effective listeners, while others focused on how they will give each other constructive feedback. This is one of the most unique areas to discuss and will vary greatly from group to group. It is necessary to stay true to your specific group needs.

Determine a Shared Passion

We discussed earlier that a community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact over time (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, & Carter, 1993). In order to do this, the team engaged in a brainstorming session to come up with a common inquiry. Sticky notes were used to write down needs and interests.

The teams were encouraged to ask themselves the following questions when coming up with a team inquiry:

- Is it authentic?
 - Is it relevant to your work?
 - Is it worth the investment?
 - Is it connected to a shared vision?
 - Is it something the team wants to make better?
- (Learning Forward Ontario, n.d.).

They looked at the commonalities in their ideas then took the time to prioritize. Which of the priorities is the most important? Which of the priorities is broad enough to involve most of the staff? (Learning Forward Ontario, n.d.).

This was a vital step because there is new knowledge continuously being shared in the field of early childhood and it can be difficult to focus on really delving into something. The direction chosen may shift over time but having a specific focus can help the educators start working toward a common goal.

Team Meetings

It was then time to establish regular team meetings. It was integral to create time for the teams to engage in discussion, away from the children. Four out of nine educator participants mentioned the significance of time away from the children in their feedback. “I enjoy that this reflective practice is away from the children so that we can focus on one another's needs, ideas, etc. I am able to learn more about my colleagues and bring valuable information back to the table” (community of practice participant). At these meetings the educators explored articles and documentation, engaged in discussion about children's inquiries, created and discussed previous goals, and discussed their continuous professional learning.

Earlier we talked about how communities of practice allow for educators to delve into their ideas. These team meetings were an opportunity for this to happen. “I have greatly enjoyed this community of practice. I have a better understanding of how to reflect and build on the observations... I have found my colleague and I are able to plan more activities/provocations based on more in depth observations” (community of practice participant).

A team meeting guide was created to help educators stay on track with these team meetings. The format of this guide evolved as we continued implementing it, engaging educators, and gathering their input.

Continuous Professional Learning

The team meetings are a unique professional learning experience where the educators talk about their documentation, what is happening in their program, what professional learning has helped them and delve deeper into what resources and supports they need to help them continue to grow. It is imperative that educators continue to engage in learning opportunities throughout the year by reading articles, attending professional learning events, watching webinars and engaging in reflective discussions. This is a crucial piece of the process because there is always new information to consider as this field continues to evolve. It is always important to remember that Registered Early Childhood Educators are members of a distinct profession that values ongoing professional learning (CECE, 2018). This means that going to a couple of workshops alone is not the end of an educator's learning; we need to find ways that work for us to continuously grow and develop in this profession.



Educators exploring resources during a team meeting. (August 2018)

Impact

Two teams were followed during the first eight weeks in their communities of practice. They participated in two team meetings, and continued their learning between meetings using the resources, books, and webinars that were made available.

The first team meeting seemed to be difficult for educators. One participant mentioned that they didn't feel prepared and didn't know what to expect. Many educators were quiet and were hesitant to share their thoughts. Other educators had a lot to say and had a hard time staying on track. By the time the second team meeting came around, more of the educators knew what to expect and were prepared to engage in discussions. They talked about what had been happening since the first meeting. It was evident throughout the meetings that learning was happening already for some educators. One educator was

reflecting on her programming with the children, stating "I'm sitting back and listening rather than jumping in. I'm writing down what they're saying and building off it" (community of practice participant). For part of the meeting, the educators took the time to talk about their documentation. As educators take the time to focus on documentation they notice more about the children's capabilities and start to think more about next steps. One educator in particular really started to see the value in this. "I don't notice what's fully happening in the picture until I upload it and really reflect on it" (community of practice participant). Finding time for team meetings can seem impossible but looking at the value they had in just a short eight weeks proves how influential these meetings can be and why organizations should try and make them work.

Everything Takes Time

You may notice that your community of practice is effective right from the start, but also remember that this practice may be new to some educators and it may take time to get used to this new way of learning. The process that you start with at your program will evolve over time as you learn and grow together. Many of the educators involved in this pilot talked about having an open-mind. "Be open-minded to hearing ideas and confident in sharing your own. Ask questions and really try and use it as an opportunity to learn and grow" (community of practice participant).

A study done as part of an Innovation Teacher Project at Presidio Child Development Centre in San Francisco engaged teachers in a three year pilot based on Reggio principles. Part of this project included educators engaging in regular team meetings. Educators were followed for three years as they learned more about the Reggio approach (Lyon, Susan, David, & Donahue, 2009). During year one, educators became defensive, silent, and resistant to change. By the third year, all educators were contributing to the meetings and the conversations were more focused on the curriculum, planning, and the classroom environment (Lyon, Susan, David, & Donahue, 2009).

As you explore this process there will be initiatives that work well and some that need to be reconsidered. If something isn't effective right away, don't give up. Bring the educators into the process. Encourage them to establish the best approach to team meetings and help them discover what the goals are.

You may even notice immediate changes in how your team is engaging with each other. In this community of practice pilot, educators were grateful to have this opportunity. One educator in particular noticed a difference in such a short time. "The team meetings get you to put your differences aside and focus on what's really happening in the centre" (community of practice participant).

Final Thoughts

Introducing communities of practice into your professional learning repertoire will give educators a collective

understanding of how best to support children, families and each other. It will also give early learning professionals a chance to look deeper into their practice, and an opportunity to collaborate with fellow educators to really be a part of a co-learning process. "Don't give up. It's called a practice because you are just practicing. Some days are easier than others; having the support of a team really helps so we can encourage, provoke and support each other's practice on a regular basis" (community of practice participant).

References

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