Supporting professional learning for Early Years practitioners

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Abstract

Kari Esterhuizen graduated from the Herts. MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning in 2007. In this article, she describes how she used her project to develop her own and others' understanding of networking and the skills to facilitate it, with the aim of supporting professional learning for Early Years practitioners.

In my role as Early Years Adviser within Hertfordshire local authority I have a professional responsibility to ensure that Early Years practitioners can be confident participants in an exciting, ever-changing learning landscape. I began to question the impact of current professional learning opportunities available across a range of Early Years settings. As an experienced adviser I also had a responsibility to support my colleagues in the Early Years advisory team. I began to consider the possibility of addressing both sets of needs through the development of effective networking.

The development of Children's Centres as part of the Government's Ten Year Strategy (DfES, 2004) highlighted the need for training and support services for Early Years workers across all disciplines. I felt I had an important role to play in encouraging the development of these multi-agency partnerships and collaborating with colleagues in the provision of a range of personal development opportunities.

I began to consider the potential for developing a community of collaborative learners, particularly in relation to the new 'Children's Centres'. What were the potential opportunities for collaboration between practitioners in local areas and how could such a community of learners be facilitated? The role of local authority network facilitators seemed pivotal. I therefore decided to investigate the strategies that experienced network facilitators develop in order to facilitate effective practitioner communities.

Designing the project

I began by gathering local information through a discussion with the Early Years management team. The analysis of documentary evidence and a limited number of interviews with experienced network facilitators would inform my plan for working with inexperienced network facilitators to raise their levels of skill and understanding.

My discussion with the management team was extremely useful. Not only did it help me to clarify my purpose, it also assured me that we had shared goals and a sense of mutual accountability. The next step was to involve my advisory team colleagues. During one of our meetings I explained my project, gained their consent and explored team members' perceptions of networking. My aim was to identify effective networks through the local intelligence of my colleagues. The facilitators we identified as experienced would be interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of successful network facilitation strategies. Our conversation was useful but we lacked a common understanding about what constituted an effective network and we also lacked knowledge of the local networks. We decided to identify successful networks by their longevity and therefore chose the three most established Early Years networks in the county for further investigation. In reflecting on this meeting it became clear that my project would need to focus on the development of a clearer understanding of the key principles of network facilitation within our advisory team. I was also keen to find ways to encourage team members to reflect on their own roles within the developing Early Years networks.

I used a document search (Duffy, 2005) to assess whether my proposed project was feasible and gain further understanding of the background to and nature of local networks. I gathered evidence from administrative artefacts and databases held by the administration team. This included surveys, attendance registers, staffing returns and minutes of working group meetings. I established that the networks we had identified did indeed have consistently high attendance figures. It was at this stage however that information came to light which was very influential in my development work. I had previously led a conference for practitioners on the KEEP[1] principles (DfES, 2005) during which I had gathered their views about professional learning opportunities

[1] KEEP: Key Elements of Effective Practice

and networking. Participants indicated a low level of attendance at local cluster networks and this raised questions about practitioners' beliefs about the value of learning from each other. It was clear that the challenge was to foster a much broader appreciation of the potential different professional learning activities. These reflections provided a starting point for the interviews I would conduct with network facilitators.

Supporting effective network facilitation

I interviewed experienced network facilitators to help determine the criteria for successful network facilitation. Recurring themes included: management and organisation, constructing networking as learning, practitioners as facilitators, communication skills, membership of the professional community, informal relationships and sharing practice.

Network management

Experienced facilitators developed systems for network management which included: regular correspondence, advertising and publicity strategies. They had a well developed awareness of their audience and had thought carefully about the type of venues to be used.

Networking as learning

Facilitators understood the potential of networks to support learning. They believed that network participants need to share this view although they were not confident that this was the case. The facilitators also commented on the need to make explicit the link between teacher and pupil learning.

> *Effective networks have the potential to lead to this improvement, but participants do not necessarily link continuing professional development with children's learning.*
>
> (Sarah)

Encouraging network participants to take ownership of the network and to drive the agenda was seen as one way of addressing these issues.

> *When I encourage the participants to steer the content and identify an area of need and/or interest, all participants return to the next session and contribute from their own experiences/practice… An effective collaborative style of working has developed naturally!*
>
> (Jessica)

Practitioners as facilitators

The network facilitators I interviewed were dealing with the same issues as their network participants on a day-to-day basis. This raised a new question for me: is it essential for network facilitators to be practitioners? There were serious implications here for those network facilitators who were local authority advisors who would have a different relationship with network participants.

Communication skills

A recurring theme was the importance of the facilitators' communication skills (Rodd, 2006). This included being able to communicate across the spectrum, including everything from the effective use of buzz words on advertising materials to a friendly smile and eye contact with participants on arrival at a venue. This was illustrated by the following comment from one of my interviewees.

> *As the facilitator I carefully try to ensure that all individuals are very warmly welcomed and invited into a friendly, non-threatening space for refreshments before the session officially starts.*
>
> (Lindy)

Facilitation of learning conversations is also a highly skilled dimension of the role of network facilitator.

Membership of a professional community

Interviewees reported that invitations to participate in the network were not based on the individual's personal status or qualifications; membership of the professional community was based on working to support the learning of very young children in some way. Specifically, all facilitators mentioned that it was essential that support staff also be considered as network members. This was particularly interesting to me as I had been keen to discover if practitioners with varying levels of responsibility and qualification can contribute to each others' professional development. This seemed to confirm that the membership of networks in the primary education sector is usually more inclusive than that in other phases (Bolam *et al.*, 2005). In Hertfordshire virtually all Early Years education is provided within the context of primary schools. The professional networks therefore seemed to offer an effective forum for acknowledging and learning from the contribution of the different members.

Informal relationships

The experienced facilitators were keen to emphasise the value of the informal relationships that developed between network members. I became increasingly aware of the need to help inexperienced network facilitators to appreciate the importance of informal professional relationships in a successful network.

Sharing practice

Network facilitators were clear about the centrality of enabling practitioners to share accounts of their work as illustrated by the following comments from one of the interviews.

> *It is not a training session, we do not invite a trainer. We consider the issue and discuss what is known amongst ourselves. We are always seated in a circle. Practitioners make voluntary contributions to the discussion. At some sessions some practitioners have more to offer then others since they might be more knowledgeable about that particular subject whereas at another session another practitioner might be better informed and have more to share with the group. It is more about sharing ideas and explaining what works for you within your particular context.*
>
> (Inger)

If Early Years professional networking was to be successfully developed across the county, I needed to highlight the importance of this function which is essentially about enabling practitioners to build professional knowledge together through the exchange of accounts of practice.

The next phase – developing an intervention

I met again with the Early Years management team and we discussed what I had discovered. We decided that I would design a series of half-termly workshops to support inexperienced network facilitators. These would be based on the themes I had identified as being common to successful networks. The workshops would build on the episodic nature of adult learning as emphasised by Rogers (1996) and, by revisiting previous learning and respecting the on-going experiences of the new facilitators, enhance their professional development.

In the first workshop I wanted to address organisational and management issues in order to underpin more strategic development. I asked the new network facilitators to consider developing a predictable pattern to their future network sessions.   It was

subsequently agreed that the agenda for the termly network sessions would be structured to enable the new facilitators to communicate some key messages as well as to provide opportunities for collaborative learning conversations between and amongst participants. This style of organisation closely matched the models described by the successful network facilitators. It also helped to challenge an underlying misconception that these networks were additional training opportunities with content driven by the local authority's quality improvement agenda.

We also addressed the issue of geographical location in this initial workshop. We decided to map our networks against existing consortiums such as Extended Schools and Children's Centre communities. Each network facilitator reviewed current participation and considered the accuracy of the database for their particular patch. In this way, the networking database was adapted and the idea of collaborative working established.

Collaborative learning

I wanted to provide an opportunity within the workshops for discussion about the ways in which adults learn collaboratively. I prepared an interactive workshop activity using key statements from my reading. The statements included the five assumptions proposed by Knowles (1984) regarding how adults learn.

a) Adults are largely self-directed and require a climate of collaboration to learn effectively.
b) The previous experiences of the learner have to be implicit in the learning process.
c) The adult learner needs to accept the need to learn and they only internalise learning if motivated by intrinsic factors.
d) Adult learners are biased towards problem solving as a learning activity.
e) Practical relevance is a significant factor in gaining commitment.

We used these statements to lead us to reflect as a group on the importance of workplace learning and the notion of learning by doing, sharing, reviewing and applying as described by Dennison and Kirk (1990). The strapline from the government's professional development strategy (DfEE, 2001) helped to summarise our thoughts: 'learning from each other, learning from what works'.

During this interactive session it was agreed that the key to motivating the Early Years professional community was to involve them in sharing their experiences and facilitating the transferability of ideas. New facilitators regarded the potential support of 'Leading Teachers' and 'Lead Practitioners' in achieving these aims as a positive way forward. It was agreed that there would be great benefit to the allocation of a Leading Teacher to each of the 10 districts across the county to work in partnership with them.

The focus of our last workshop was effective communication. I used a self-evaluation grid as a means of encouraging the new facilitators to reflect on their personal communication skills. The aim of the workshop was to draw attention to the importance of communication and to develop an appreciation of the value of encouraging participants to become involved in reflective dialogue. We collectively identified that the challenge facing all facilitators was how to bring about change not only at the level of talk, but also in practice.

Evaluating my development work

I wanted to know how the new network facilitators' saw the impact of the workshops on their understanding of networking and on their ability to facilitate effective networks. I chose to interview them collectively. It was clear that a more collaborative pattern of working had resulted in improved 'structures, conditions, personal relationships and an agreed common language in use' (Turbill, 2004:102). Over the weeks and months since the initial workshop they had clearly improved their personal and interpersonal capacity (Frost and Durrant, 2002) and had developed a clearer understanding of networking.

> *Networking is an important part of a whole menu of opportunities that should be available for practitioners to access. The social context of networking provides opportunities for practitioners to exchange ideas and learn from each other. It is a means of embedding professional development, not only a means of broadening it.*
>
> (Agreed Statement)

Their fundamental values and beliefs about networking had become more coherent, as had their practice.

> *We have realised that there is a need for the facilitator to be overall responsible for organising the network, from basic tasks like writing the correspondence to more demanding skills like facilitating group*

discussions. We also appreciate that a blame culture was developing and that we have now realised our level of accountability. Having taken ownership of this responsibility we will ensure that the management and organisation strategies agreed amongst ourselves are consistently applied and reviewed.

(Agreed Statement)

They reflected a high level of awareness of the importance of developing skills in building and maintaining professional relationships (Frost and Durrant, 2002).

Developing relationships is one of the most important aspects leading to successful and sustainable networking. Fundamentally networking is dependent on good relationships, mutual trust and respect developing between practitioners and between the facilitator and the practitioners. These relationships are more likely to develop if a key person facilitates a local network over a period of time and makes an effort to get to know the participants.

(Agreed Statement)

On a personal level, the network facilitators were very positive about the impact of the workshops as opportunities to network and establish a shared understanding of their role. This was expressed in the following agreed statement:

(The workshops) provided a unique opportunity to consider, reflect on and clarify their roles and responsibilities as new network facilitators. The workshops helped individuals to develop an appreciation of each others' points of view, a chance to discuss current leadership and management strategies and to collectively affirm the vision for Early Years networking in Hertfordshire.

(Agreed Statement)

Following this session I met with the Early Years management team to feed back what I had learned.

Moving from knowledge to action

In the feedback I recommended focusing our attention on networking at three levels. I believed we should continue to manage and organise the networks according to the procedures we had agreed in the workshops and review these regularly to gauge their effectiveness. At a strategic level we should respond to the important issue of understanding impact and agree a policy for Early Years networking. We should also focus on developing relationships and leadership, that is, on building capacity in order to ensure long-

term sustainable improvement. Opportunities for networking need to be expanded and relevant professional development experiences offered to the facilitators.

The management group responded very positively to these suggestions. We agreed that our particular focus will be creating organisational capacity and developing opportunities for integrated networking in relation to specific Children's Centres.

Networking and pupil learning

Despite the positive evaluation of my work with the network co-ordinators, there was little evidence from either the experienced or inexperienced facilitators that networking impacted on pupils' learning.

> *Although we are confident that we have personally acquired new knowledge and that this has directly and indirectly improved our network facilitation we are unsure as to whether the participants internalise, reflect upon and apply their learning to their particular context. It is difficult to measure impact other than through evidence of visible changes and therefore we need another means by which to evaluate impact.*
>
> (Agreed Statement)

I too had little evidence that networking positively impacted on the quality of teaching and learning in Early Years provision. I felt that I had learned little about one of my areas of interest, that is, whether it is possible to influence learning and teaching through improved and on-going interaction between adult learners and more specifically amongst Early Years practitioners. I was continually challenged by a comment in the 'Better Schools' document from the 1980s which made the point that 'insufficient attention had been given to evaluating the extent to which teachers and schools benefited from training undertaken' (DES, 1985:44). The annual Ofsted report demonstrated that little had changed, stressing that 'few schools evaluated successfully the impact of continuing professional development on the quality of teaching and on pupils' achievement' (Ofsted, 2006:4).

In discussing this issue with my colleagues, we felt that we needed to continue to attempt to develop quality indicators to determine the impact of effective networking on pupil learning. This became an area for development for the Hertfordshire Early Years team.

The way ahead

Early Years provision is currently undergoing fundamental changes in response to the Government's Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters' (DfES, 2003) which sets out the proposals for reforming the delivery of services for children, young people and families. Proposals include, among others, the development of Children's Centres and the promotion of full service extended schools. Against this backdrop and key to the Government's agenda to reform the education system is the 'New Relationship with Schools' (DfES, 2004). This initiative was aimed at streamlining the bureaucratic channels between the school, its local authority and the DfES. Within Hertfordshire this new relationship is referred to as 'The Hertfordshire Learning Partnership' (CSF, 2005). Under these arrangements, schools will have more autonomy to determine their improvement priorities and the appropriate support packages to enable them to address these priorities. Recognising that some schools are more creative in finding solutions than others, the local authority's role is to build capacity by creating links and encouraging schools to work in partnership with each other and with local community groups. The time is ripe for us to grasp the opportunity to broker such networks, to facilitate lateral learning relationships and re-configure our own functions to support networks as the new 'units of engagement' (NCSL, 2006).

Through this development work I have come to a deeper appreciation of the value of professional learning through membership of a professional network. I have developed my ability to identify my own learning needs and those of others. In facilitating a series of professional development workshops I have sharpened my understanding of the demands of network facilitation and now appreciate the depth of challenge related to the role of a facilitator.

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