Community planning as community of practice: qualitative evaluation of an early childhood development intervention programme

Hongxia Shan, Nazeem Muhajarine, Kristjana Loftson, Fleur Macqueen Smith, Saskatchewan Population Health Research Unit, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

KidsFirst, an early childhood intervention programme, Saskatchewan, Canada, aims to promote children’s development, from prenatal to kindergarten age, through effecting social changes for high-risk families. While KidsFirst is a government initiative, it is premised on a community planning and intersectoral partnership model. Our study shows that the programme’s overall effectiveness depends in part on how well the community comes together to shape the programme. Treating the community planning process as a community of practice, we identify three conditions that contribute to the success of the programme: 1) diverse membership and strong leadership; 2) building on existing community synergy and momentum, and 3) open and transparent communications. We start with an introduction of KidsFirst, and the qualitative component of our evaluation research. We proceed to present the programme planning process as a community of practice (COP). We then discuss the research findings and end the paper with a few notes on the implications of these findings.

Introduction to KidsFirst

Scholars in education and health (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Muhajarine, Vu, and Labonte, 2006; Ogbu, 1981, Vygotsky, 1978) have posited that the social-ecological environment has an impact on children’s development. Few educational and health intervention projects, however, have been equipped and framed to address the social-ecological environments in which children grow in order to promote healthy development among children. KidsFirst intervention project in Saskatchewan, Canada is a provincially funded project mandated to do just that.

Launched in 2002 following the First Minister’s Early Childhood Development Agreement, KidsFirst is offered in nine sites in Saskatchewan, Canada, each community or urban area experiencing considerable challenges to keep children healthy. It aims to promote healthy growth of children in high-risk families through intervention measures such as home visiting, bridging parents to mental health and addiction services and child care, and delivering curriculum on early learning and care to parents.

Structurally, KidsFirst is not a standalone programme. Instead, it is designed to bring together resources and knowledge from different sectors so that it can bridge gaps in services, and to provide coordinated and comprehensive services to expand parents’
capacity to nurture their children. Within these parameters, the programme also affords each site the flexibility to adapt the programme to meet the needs of each community. To that end, the programme requires each site to engage in community planning, which is a process for the programme to involve the community in identifying gaps and forming intersectoral partnership.

The qualitative evaluation methods
Our evaluation of KidsFirst took place between 2006 and 2010. For this research, we used mixed methods to determine the effectiveness of the programme. The aim of the qualitative research in particular is to identify the practices and processes that help the programme reach its goals and objectives. Some of the goals and objectives include addressing the basic needs of high risk families, supporting parents to access mental and addiction services, and enhancing parents’ prenatal and parenting knowledge etc. (Muhajarine, Glacken, Cammer, & Green, 2007).

For the qualitative study, we adopted a basic interpretive qualitative approach, which is descriptive and inductive in nature (Merriam, 2002). For the field research, we conducted interviews, focus groups and participatory observation. Our study participants include people of all levels of KidsFirst staff and management, people from supporting agencies and KidsFirst clients in all nine sites. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. For the purpose of member check, transcribed interviews were sent back to the participants, who indicated an interest in receiving and reviewing their interviews. The research team then started coding the transcripts for recurring themes and to identify the practices contributing to or hindering programme from reaching its goals.

Local programme planning as a community of practice
In this paper, we use COP as a lens to examine KidsFirst community planning process. While COP did not inform the evaluation design, it helps shed lights on some nuanced aspects of the community planning process that contribute to the success of the programme at different sites.

COP is a conceptual notion that references ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002, 4). According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), COPs share three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, a group of people, and shared practices. The domain of knowledge defines a set of issues for the COP members. COP members are those who interact in various ways to transmit, transfer and transform knowledge and practices in a common domain. Shared practices are “a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share” (ibid, 29). In the past few years, the construct of COP has been taken up by many people from diverse fields. In the meantime, it has been subjected to close scrutiny. In particular, criticism has been directed towards its lack of attention to power and contexts, and questions have been raised about the nature of COP (Roberts, 2006). Amid the criticism, it is also recognized that the COP concept can be used to provide some guidance for the development of groups, teams and networks (Li et al, 2009).
The local planning process of *KidsFirst* is a unique type of COP. To start with, it is a community-based process where the programme consults the community on community needs and services gaps, although not everyone has the same power to when it comes to deciding specific programme activities and partnership formation. As well, although people involved in the local planning process may not share a set of practices, ideas, or language, often, as the planning process unfolds, they start negotiate a common vision, and work towards a common goal, which is to optimize the social environment for the healthy development of children.

At the centre of the planning process is a management committee, which together with the local accountable partner, either the health district or a school board, is responsible for the continued development and implementation of the *KidsFirst* programme at the local level. The local accountable partner and the management committee were initially designated by the province. Over time, the composition of the management committee has changed. At the time of the study, the management committee differs from site to site. Most of them had representatives from health services, and education (particularly the school boards). Some also had representatives from social services, Aboriginal Tribal council, partnering agencies, and other community organizations such as the ministerial associations.

The accountable partner, with input from the management committee, is responsible for hiring a programme manager. The programme manager administers day-to-day operation of the programme, identify potential partners and negotiate contracts with partnering agencies. She is accountable to the management committee as well as to the accountable partner, who in turn are accountable to the province for fund disbursement.

To identify gaps in services and to formulate community partnership, the programme manager typically goes to the community to collect voices and knowledge, through attending interagency meetings, setting up advisory committees, holding panel discussions, and connecting and communicating with other agencies at the individual level. That is, in addition to the management committee, and the accountable partner (sometimes, the accountable partner is also part of the management committee) who have the authority to make final programme decisions, people from the community at large are also involved in the programme planning process although in a peripheral capacity. These people include representatives from government organizations such as RCMP, representatives from interagency committees, and individuals such as home visitors, Aboriginal Elders, and high-risk families.

**Discussion of research findings**

In our study, we find that the effectiveness of the programme to a great extent depends on how successful the community comes together to identify community needs and services gaps and shape intersectoral partnership. In the sites where the programme was reported to be a success, there were clear efforts to reach out to the community and to bring the community together for consultation, programme planning, and partnership formation. As well, study participants from these sites explicitly adopted a common vision to work across differences for the well-being of children. Most importantly, intersectoral territorialism, which has hindered *KidsFirst’s* collaboration with other organizations across sites, is reported to be subsiding in these sites. In this section, we discuss the organizational conditions conducive to successful community planning. These are 1) diverse membership and strong
leadership; 2) building on community capacity and momentum, and 3) open and transparent communication.

Diverse membership and strong leadership
Membership is a key construct in COP. When Lave and Wenger first raised the notion of COP in 1991, they were interested in the learning space where novices or new members learn their ways into COP through legitimate peripheral participation. When Wenger tried to further develop the notion of COP in his 1998 and 2002 books, he presented an image where community members are mutually accountable, share a sense of belonging, or identity and a common passion, and engage in joint endeavours. Implicitly, a sense of solidarity is attributed to the members within a COP. Our study shows some more nuanced understanding of membership. Specifically, we identified that diverse and key members need to be engaged in order to ensure inclusive voices as well as a solid base for practice. Further, while a democratic ethos and a sense of solidarity might feature successful and mature communities of practices, the process of building such features is not without challenges. Institutional agenda and interests that come with diverse membership, which many of our respondents pointed out as territorialism, are one major challenge. Strong leadership as such is needed to align the interests of a diverse group of people within the parameters of the programme.

Diverse membership from the community is crucial for solid programme planning. When the programme succeeds in registering the interests, voices, energy and supports from people, and caters to the needs of the community, it tends to thrive in the community. Indeed, the programme across sites has tried to engage diverse members in the community planning process. Below is how a programme manager brought people together in one particular site.

Well, I think one of the things that we did was when we began, um, in each component, I called together people in the community who were experts in that component, because the components are all quite different, as you know, when we were talking about mental health, I had mental health folks in the community come together and provide us some advice about what kind of model we wanted and where we might want to take that. And when we did the home visiting piece we had huge groups, you know, thirty people sitting around a table talking about what were our challenges and what were our strengths, and what might we do. And you know, we had families at those tables. (Programme manager)

Involving diverse members is important as different voices, not only voices from the experts, but also voices from the margin, may lend people in the programme planning process a different perspective. For example, some services providers involved in the programme planning processes complained that KidsFirst clients do not keep their appointments. However, when they heard the stories of the families, either from the families or from the home visitors, they started to rethink their services delivery method and some also made services changes so as to encourage access and services utility.

In the study, many participants celebrated that it is the interests of the children that brought people together around the table of community planning. However, the
process of bringing people together was eventful for many sites. According to our participants, it was not always easy to engage services providers. Another issue that was reported is that when the project was first launched, there was a sense of territorial protectionism; some services providers suspected that KidsFirst was about to take away their clients. In these sites, it was not until KidsFirst, often the programme manager, managed to communicate its roles and functions and establish relationship with other services agencies that it started to gain support from the community. As well, it takes strong leadership from the programme manager as well as from the chair of the management committee to align the interests and needs of the community with the programme mandates and vice versa.

Building on community capacity and momentum

Through the lens of COP, the world comprises a constellation of COPs (Shan, 2009), and at any point of our life courses, we necessarily belong to different COPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998;). Many studies on COP have taken for granted that COP is an informal structure that has different durations of lives (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). Rarely has anyone noted the linkages between different COPs. In our study, it is clear that how KidsFirst taps into and builds on other collective community groups and efforts sets the dynamics of its programme planning process, if only for the initial while when the programme was launched.

In a few sites, KidsFirst programme planning started from being part of the interagency meetings that had been running before the programme was announced in these communities. Prior COP established within the community can be turned into a platform and a forum for the KidsFirst to grow.

Early Childhod Network having already been in existence to a great extent helped [KidsFirst] because there was already sort of a … forum that this could be presented to that already had some membership. So I think that was really positive… (Management committee member)

For KidsFirst, when it successfully builds on the existing community, it benefits in multiple ways. To start with, when tapped into existing COPs, the programme could ride on a community momentum rooted in genuine care, which had been cultivated for years. It can also benefit from the trust and relationship and leadership already built within the community. The knowledge repertories built in established COP can help shape the KidsFirst programme directly.

The crucial thing that we need to point out is that when the programme framework of KidsFirst fits well with the desires and needs of existing COPs, the programme tends to have a strong head start. In cases where the KidsFirst mandate contradicts what the local community believes to be the most effective strategies, it may disrupt the momentum for community collaboration. For example, in one site, the local community had come together to strategize around ways to help high-risk families. They were planning to build additional community facilities to serve all families within the community including the high-risk families. Yet, such measures are not allowed for in the KidsFirst framework, which expected no standalone projects independent of existing services. In cases like this, the local community felt hurt, and being failed, and as a result, lost its interest in engaging further with KidsFirst. It took the programme manager many years’ efforts to try to fix the damage done to the very community.
Engaging open and transparent communication

One central critique of COP is that it lacks attention to the issue of power (Robarts, 2006; Mutch, 2003). In many of the studies of COP, a democratic ethos and a “sentimentalized solidarity” (Bentley, Brownman, and Poole, 2010, p. 9) have been attributed to the members within COP. What is cast in the shadow is the institutional and professional interest and agenda that members may bring with them to the COP (Gabbay, le May, Jefferson, Webb, Lovelock, Powell, 2003; DePalma and Teague, 2008). The issue of power is most prevalent in the community planning process for the KidsFirst programme across sites, which is largely related to territorialism. Territorialism is a tendency for members to protect and promote their respective institutional interests and agendas. As suggested by our study respondents, territorialism comes about when different organizations are made to compete for the same pool of funding, or when the policies, procedures and mandates of different institutions come into conflicts and services providers feel like being stepped on the toes by one another.

Given that KidsFirst is set up to bridge gaps in existing services, structurally, it does not encourage competition and secrecy around funding. Further, the programme vision to advance the interests of vulnerable children is easily accepted by the public. Yet, until such programme mandates are communicated to and adopted by the community, territorialism can negatively affect the implementation process of KidsFirst.

Further, transparency in the planning process, especially in decision making process to select a services partner, also helps avoid any potential conflict among services organizations in the community.

*We picked our partners like an interview process. So they came to the table and we had sort of a little community panel and they presented what they thought they could, you know, bring to the programme and the families, and that was how we made our decisions. It was very transparent in the community. I mean, we had very good agencies say things like,...people were really thoughtful about ‘you know what, I know exactly what you’re looking for, you’ve been transparent about that. We are not a good fit but those folks that are applying are a good fit.’ We didn’t have fallout from the decisions.*

(Programme manager)

It has to be mentioned that sometimes, it is hard to overcome territorialism especially when it is rooted in different institutional work mandate and framework. In particular, respondents reported the programme butting heads with social services due to jurisdiction conflicts. In such cases, an effective practice is for the organizations involved to come together and produce a common protocol and to define roles for respective agencies.

Implications of the findings

Based on the qualitative study of our evaluation research, we teased out three conditions that contribute to successful community planning and intersectoral partnership: broad membership and strong leadership, community momentum, and transparent communication. These findings accentuate the significance of a
community planning process that values community ownership, services provider collaboration and transparent communications. They also show that it is indeed possible and imperative to address power and context in studying COP, as they have significant bearing on how people produce knowledge and shape practices as a group.

References

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 30 June 2010