

Chapter 18

Co-Constructing a Learning Community: A Tool for Developing International Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development of professional understanding across a large group of professionals and academics from eight different countries engaged in an international project. The focus of the project was to develop a suite of appropriate electronic tools to support the wide range of professionals (doctors, teachers, care and family workers, psychologists and medical and occupational therapists) who may be involved in working with and providing support for vulnerable children and families, which would be relevant across European countries. This case study explores how effective communication developed between the members of the research group to enable greater common understanding of both cultural and country specific provision, needs, and the underpinning philosophy and principles behind current provision in different countries represented. It explores the role of a 'learning community' and a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1998) in this process as a tool for developing understanding. It provides insights into related issues, and possible future lessons to be learnt.

CONTEXT

As part of a European funded international research project, a partnership was formed between eight European countries with a total of fifteen individual representatives, including the author, with the stated outcome of providing an electronic

resource to support the wide range of professional services working with children and their families in the context of early childhood intervention. Whilst English was the agreed medium for discussion and communication, the English speaking skills within the group varied from highly competent to limited, with only two members of the group

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being English first language users. All members were experts in the field of early childhood intervention and in their understanding of the range of support required by vulnerable children in order to address their needs. The partners were drawn from academic, professional and practice-based backgrounds.

The focus of the two year project was to explore additional and/or more effective ways of providing support and professional development for those professionals and practitioners who support and work with vulnerable children and their families in order to support early and effective intervention. The overall theme of the project was that of 'Early Childhood Intervention' (Carpenter, 1997; Guralnick, 2008a, 2008b; Guralnick & Albertini, 2006; Pretis, 2006) so as to ultimately minimise the impact of any factors contributing to this vulnerability, whether it be an economic, social, education or health issue.

Alisauskiene (2009) offers a definition of Early Childhood Intervention that takes into account 'rights', 'support' and 'empowerment': 'Early intervention relates to the right of very young children and their families to receive the support they might need – and usually this is multi-professional support ... Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) aims to support and empower the child, the family and the services involved.'

The intention from the outset was to develop a common European resource which would both address issues of inter-professional understanding but also to develop greater inter-European understanding of the individual national, educational, social, medical and economic contexts impacting on specific provision. To quote Pretis:

A shared aim of Early Childhood Intervention is to reach all children and families in need of support as early as possible. Three types of recommendations were suggested in 2005 ... a) existence of policy measures at local, regional and national levels in order to guarantee Early Childhood Intervention as a right for children and families in need; b) availability of information as soon as

required (extensive, clear and precise) to be offered at local regional and national levels, addressed to families and professionals; c) clear definition of target groups, in order for policy makers to decide, in cooperation with professionals, on Early Childhood Intervention eligibility criteria. (Pretis, 2009b, p. 1)

This need to strive for a common understanding was an underpinning principle of the project, driven by the focus of the project and by the partner members themselves, becoming increasingly important over the two year life-span of the project.

In order to enable us to develop appropriate on-line resources, professional development tools and potentially accredited academic programmes, it was essential for us to understand, and not to make assumptions about, provision in all countries in the partnership, or at least the provision within the specific region or district of the country as familiar to the project members. As the project unfolded it became increasingly clear that, in order to do this effectively, we, as a group, needed ultimately to develop and share a common understanding of the concepts and theoretic and practical frameworks to which we constantly referred and within which we operated in our daily working lives. The notion of a 'shared language' not only related to our own native tongues (German, Hungarian, Turkish and more), choosing a common language for communication purposes (English) but to much more complex issues of what the actual words and concepts meant to us as individuals. This latter understanding underpins the central focus of the related research by the author and this academic paper.

In order to develop this mutual understanding and take the requirements of the project forward as well as our own professional learning, we engaged in range of activities, some joint, some independent which were then shared across the partnership, using a range of communication systems, including electronic and face to face meetings. In this case study, the writer and member of the partnership will explore the impact and effectiveness of the

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