

Mentors Engage in “Community Collaborative Planning” By Carmella Singleton, M.A.

Mentors in St John’s, Newfoundland know that collaboration has a positive impact on their teaching practices and is an expression of the Guiding Principles of the Partners in Practice Mentoring Model (1999). These principles emphasize the importance of mentors...

- supporting and recognizing each other,
- continuing to be reflective practitioners,
- exercising honor, respect and modesty for each other; and
- engaging in continuous growth and learning.

They realize that many things are possible when they engage in a process that encourages *collaborative inquiry*.

Early Childhood Educators in St. John’s who want to mentor students during field practice are invited to participate in mentor training (two thirty hour courses) at College of the North Atlantic. During training they are introduced to experienced and trained mentors. As well, Training Animators¹, a group of mentors from the initial Partners in Practice pilot (1999), engage and sustain trained mentors within a community of learners. This advanced mentor training is called *Community Collaborative Planning*. Mentors become part of a community of collaborative planners. *Collaborative inquiry* is now an accepted term for mentors in St. John’s as they meet to discuss and reflect upon their curriculum.

When the first group of mentors completed their training, (date) they wondered how they might continue to sustain the mentor group and continue to establish links to the new mentors in training. The group determined that they could continue to meet and study topics that were introduced in the ECE training program since their own graduation. Plans were made to develop study topics and faculty welcomed the opportunity to provide continuous learning opportunities for the mentors. These occasions provided networking opportunities. Through reflections on the sessions with the Training Animators it became clear that there was a definite need for mentors to meet and discuss the curriculum concepts and approaches presented to students in the ECE training program. All agreed that they needed opportunities to explore the ideas and underpinnings of the curriculum models taught

to students before they could formally guide students in the implementation of these models into practice within their programs. Mentors realized that when the ECE faculty provided the supports and resources to inform them about current curriculum practices they became more confident and effective in helping students reflect on their curriculum practices.

A community forum (June 2002) was called to provide input into a concept of “*Community Collaborative Planning*”. All participants agreed that mentors needed opportunities for them to meet and have dialogue amongst themselves about curriculum practices. As well, it had the potential to inform practice and affect their application of the concepts in their own programs. Initially, this concept was presented as a course entitled *Mentors in the Childcare Community- A Community Collaborative Planning Approach*. However, midway through the course and following reflections with Training Animators, it became evident that what this group needed was a formal opportunity to network, reflect and engage in collaborative inquiry about curriculum practices. Collaboration with one another was essential to making informed decisions about changes to curriculum practices.

Currently, mentors participate in smaller group meetings with others who work with children in similar age groups and engage in collaborative inquiry. Larger group meetings with all the mentors are useful when common concerns and considerations arise that may require bringing in additional resources to provide material for further reflection and collaborative inquiry. Training Animators assigned to each small group play a key role in helping groups determine when they need additional resources for reflection and dialogue.

A Community Collaborative Planning Group:

A challenge arose with the mentors who work in the Infant Program in the College of the North Atlantic Demonstration Centre as it is the only infant centre that has trained mentors participating in the Community Collaborative Planning group. They expressed an interest in exploring ways to support infant teachers

working in community centres that are not participants in the Planning groups. A concept currently being explored by these mentors is developing curriculum web specific prop boxes ensuring that the boxes are presented in ways that promote and encourage Emergent Curriculum concepts. They plan to present these web prop boxes to the participants in the Infant Program Network Group² meetings as a foundation to dialogue with teachers in other infant programs. Mentors anticipate that when opportunities are provided for infant teachers to examine the web prop box materials and have discussion about the purpose of the boxes and how they might be presented in individual centers, there is a greater likelihood that the ideas and concepts may be tested.

The mentors realize that this concept is challenging in that these infant teachers may not have the experiences and knowledge relating to Emergent Curriculum that they have. However, they see this as a work in progress and they are anticipating success with results having an impact on their own practices as well as those of others.

One challenge for mentors and Training Animators is finding time to meet, since other commitments must be respected and recognized. Mentors have addressed this challenge by identifying it as a factor that must be considered when schedules are set for group meetings. Each group has the autonomy to explore ways to address the issue and be creative in finding ways to overcome the challenge. One of the animators summarized their group discussion of this issue in this way "...our lives are busy and sometimes there are not enough hours in the day...however I don't know what I would do without this group. It not only helps in the development of my curriculum ...but even more important I feel that I can download my problems and everyone understands and lets me vent...honestly I don't know how I could go on without those opportunities."

Collaborative inquiry about readings and discussions relating to curriculum and individual teaching practices makes a difference as to how mentors felt about their mentoring and teaching role. They feel empowered in their support of

students. During a training session with the Community Collaborative Planning group, faculty presented the expectations that the ECE program has for students during field practice. Being familiar with curriculum terminology and knowing what students are studying is empowering. One of the Community Collaborative Planning groups spoke of it this way "it isn't about what Carmella wants this group to do...she asked that we examine our curriculum in light of the readings and discussions in our group meetings. The direction we go may not be the same as another group but we think that is a good thing...we can make those decisions...and then we can share our direction with the other groups. We think that will make it more interesting...each group is finding their own way based on our experiences and centers". All mentors participating in Community Collaborative Planning groups report feeling better in general about their work with children and students; and they feel their curriculum practices are more informed as they engage in learning related to current research and practice.

Community Collaborative Planning provides networking opportunities for mentors and opportunity to meet their needs of voice, belonging and safe reflection. Having an opportunity to engage in cycles of action and reflection has a profound effect on their teaching practices.

When given numerous opportunities to engage in collaborative inquiry mentors are confident in directing their individual learning and teaching practices.

At an opening celebration for the Partners In Practice pilot in 1999 in St. John's, the District Administrator spoke of the possibilities that mentoring would encourage- an opportunity for the College and the ECE community to work together, connecting training to the practice. At that moment in time, he, and those present, had no idea of how true this statement was. They did not know because a blueprint did not exist as to how mentoring would evolve in St. John's. The community did know that mentoring had the potential to change the way field practice was happening. ECE faculty members report student success with respect to implementing curriculum practices in collaboration with their mentors. A faculty member said "it makes a

difference when mentors know the language of the students and can provide models to fit the students and the program's expectations". What they didn't know was the potential it had to bring together and sustain such large numbers of mentors working in community child care centers in a way that would affect the curriculum provided within those centres thus benefiting the children attending those centers.

Mentors participating in Community Collaborative Planning in St John's are successful in the promotion of community based development. They demonstrate the guiding principles of the Partners in Practice Mentoring Model in their support and recognition of each other, their reflective practice, their commitment to continuous growth and learning, and building relationships based on honour, respect and modesty. In addition, the mentors within this ECE community have taken steps to ensure that a mentoring culture exists and is sustained for Early Childhood Educators to have their voices articulated, expressed and heard in a safe, ethical environment.

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End notes:

- 1. Training Animators are experienced and trained mentors who take a lead role in the initial mentor training for novice mentors and coordinate the Community Collaborative Planning groups that meet to animate and sustain mentoring in Newfoundland and Labrador.*
- 2. Infant Program Network Group meetings were designed to support Infant Community Centres and Infant teachers working in those centres when Group Infant Care became licensed in Newfoundland and Labrador in Spring 2002.*

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New Resources in the Connections Library:

Seefeldt, C. (2002) *Creating Rooms of Wonder*, Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House Inc.

Full of ideas on how to display children's artwork to enhance the learning process and communicate with parents. Learn from the theories of Reggio Emilia and put your children's art to work in your program.

Carter, M. and Curtis, D. (1998) *The Visionary Director*, St Paul, Min: Redleaf Press.

A handbook for dreaming, organizing and Improvising in your centre. Chapters cover cultivating a vision, developing systems thinking for management roles, implementing principles and strategies for mentoring and building a learning community for adults and children.

Baldwin, Sue *Lighten Up and Live Longer (1999) and the Playful Adult (2002)* Stillwater, Minn: INSIGHTS Training & Consulting.

Two books to lighten your day, and incorporate humour and perspective into your life.

Ferguson, E., Flanagan Rochon, K., Lutes, Jerchel, L., and Mauch, D. (2003) *The Role of Regulation in a Framework that Supports Good Outcomes for Children*, Halifax: CCCNS.

A description of how government regulation and child care sector self regulation work together in meeting the Federal-Provincial-Territorial commitment commitments to children 0-6 as outlined in the Early Childhood Development Communiqué (2000) and the Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care (2003).

Miller, C., and Ferguson, E. (2003) *Attracting and Keeping Qualified Staff in Child Care: The National Environmental Scan*. Halifax: CCCNS.

A national scan of the causes of retention and recruitment challenges in Canadian Child Care. The scan incorporates reports from the provinces/territories, a union perspective, and case studies from Manitoba and Quebec that illustrate sector-government partnerships in addressing the challenges.

Petrash, J. (2002). *Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out*, Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House Inc.

Provides a written picture of the key components of a Waldorf education.

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