



GROWING TOGETHER

Developing and Sustaining a
Community of Practice
in Early Childhood

Kathi Gillaspay, MEd | Megan Vinh, PhD | Nancy Surbrook-Goins | Sarah Nichols

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Gryphon House
www.gryphonhouse.com



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Published by Gryphon House, Inc.
P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 (fax)
Visit us on the web at www.gryphonhouse.com.

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Library of Congress Control Number:2019943628

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INTRODUCTION

Who Should Use This Book?

We hope this book will be used by our partners in the field of early childhood, such as early interventionists, special educators, administrators, professional-development consultants, technical-assistance providers, program directors, teachers, child-care providers, students and professors of early childhood development and education, service coordinators, and home visitors. This book can be used by one person to explore or reflect individually, or it can be used by programs or teams to establish a community of practice (CoP). It can support preservice and in-service coursework to help prepare new early childhood professionals, to support practicing professionals in their daily work, and to assist state agencies in furthering professional learning in their locations. Most importantly, it can help individuals determine how a CoP can further their own learning and can provide them with the tools to begin one.

The Purpose of This Book

This book explains what a CoP is and how you can start one. Regardless of your job title or where you are in your professional career, you can create your own CoP with others who share your interests. This book discusses how to successfully begin, sustain, and facilitate a CoP and how to collect data on a CoP's effectiveness to support growth and change within the CoP over time.

How This Book Is Organized

We, the authors, have developed and sustained multiple kinds of communities of practice (CoPs) in various early childhood settings, and we are excited to share what we believe works in the field. This book includes the following steps for developing, cultivating, and sustaining a CoP:

- Finding a shared interest, shared practice, or both to explore
- Promoting your CoP and inviting people to join
- Creating the structure for your CoP
- Building a sense of fellowship among members
- Promoting member engagement and investment within and outside of meetings*
- Facilitating effectively
- Evaluating a CoP
- Collecting and using ongoing data about a CoP

A study guide appears at the end of each chapter to help you consider your own experiences related to CoPs and how CoPs can enhance your professional development. More importantly, the questions will help you explore what you need from a CoP and how you might form one. As you answer the questions, you can also note your own queries and thoughts and capture your ideas about how to start, develop, and sustain your own CoP. Ideally, you will watch your understanding evolve as you go through this book.

*In this book, unless otherwise specified, the term *meeting* refers to any CoP gathering, whether in person or virtual (such as conference calls or video chats)



DEFINING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

What Is a Community of Practice?

CoPs, both formal and informal, are everywhere. Whether you realize it or not, you have probably been part of a group that has the characteristics of a CoP. According to researchers Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, the term *communities of practice* refers to an age-old pattern of individuals sharing their knowledge with others. This behavior has its roots in times when cave-dwelling humans met to determine the best ways to hunt their prey or which plants to eat. Researchers Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger agree that CoPs have existed for as long as people have been learning and sharing their experiences through storytelling. For example, generations of women have grouped together to pass down their knowledge of how to design, piece, and sew quilts. In a more modern context, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder explain that engineers who debate over how to design a circuit, soccer moms who exchange tips about parenting, gang members who learn to survive the streets together, and manufacturing managers who commiserate about technologies and plan together for the future are all examples of informal CoPs that occur in everyday life.

Researchers including Lave and Wenger, John Brown and Paul Duguid, and Patricia Wesley and Virginia Buysse first used the formal concept of CoPs to describe how different occupational groups, such as architects and physicians, reflect on and improve their individual practices within their professions. The first CoPs emerged from a common desire among people with similar jobs to regularly reflect on and improve existing practices. According to studies by Carol Englert and Kathi Tarrant, Stephanie Pace Marshall and Connie Hatcher, and Patricia Wesley and Virginia Buysse, these original groups sought to develop common resources that each member could use in her own professional work, to challenge or support assumptions about certain practices, and to develop a shared worldview. These continue to be the main purposes of CoPs. Simply put, a CoP is a group of people who come together to problem-solve and reflect on real-life professional challenges, hot topics, or common interests by sharing experiences, ideas, tools, and resources.

Why Join a CoP?

Personal and Professional Benefits

CoPs can help strengthen teamwork, reduce feelings of professional isolation, improve professional practice, and provide personal growth for members, as researchers Karen McCreesh, Louise Larkin, and Jeremy Lewis explain. More specifically, researchers Melanie Barwick, Julia

Peters, and Katherine Boydell have found that CoP members gain a forum for exchanging knowledge and problem-solving collaboratively within real-life experiences. In a study by Torrey Trust and Brian Horrocks, education professionals who joined a CoP were more motivated and felt more confident in implementing new classroom practices. The ideal CoP, according to Wesley and Buysse, achieves these results because it incorporates the diverse expertise of its members and brings together research, policy, and practices in a way that is both meaningful and relevant to all members—something that is almost impossible to achieve through more-contrived, one-dimensional approaches, such as large-group training sessions or recorded webinars. Ultimately, collaborative reflection and inquiry-based dialogue are the true benefits of a CoP.

Advantages over Traditional Professional Development

Often professional learning happens within our organizational contexts, such as with colleagues within our current buildings or organizations or with individuals who have job titles or roles similar to ours. The structures of professional learning also continue to include large-group training sessions, which by themselves will not result in practice change. In fact, research by Ruth Wei and her colleagues and by Carl Dunst has demonstrated that a person needs fifty hours or more of traditional professional development to effectively change a practice. Additionally, traditional professional development is often mandated by leadership or other organizational structures, so individuals do not get to pursue topics of interest or additional learning of their choice.

As Wesley and Buysse note, CoPs transcend organizational barriers by allowing professionals from various roles, geographic locations, and contexts to come together based on common interests, passions, or issues and to have additional time to apply and master new ideas or practices. In some instances, a CoP develops to solve a particular problem or to pursue a specific solution. At other times, a CoP may form based on the needs of professionals who identify a shared interest, seek support to address a challenge, or desire to engage in ongoing discussion about a specific topic. Either way, the nature of CoPs is evolving and organic, which creates the opportunity for extended learning for the members. The flexibility within a CoP allows extensive professional growth to occur.

High Effectiveness and Low Cost

CoPs can be an essential component of ongoing learning for professionals who seek more than a “sit-and-get” professional-development opportunity. As researcher Carl Dunst writes both in his own article and in another coauthored with Carol Trivette, the traditional lecture-style method of training people in a workshop, conference session, or full-day training does not lead to effective changes in practice. These methods can effectively disseminate information to a large group, but they do not offer some critical components needed for people to really incorporate and use the new knowledge. Dunst and Trivette have researched professional development in early childhood intervention and have found that for an individual to actually change her practices in the long term, she needs job-embedded—or, as Sally Zepeda explains in an *Education World* article, on-the-job—opportunities to practice new skills, get feedback, and self-evaluate. Let’s look at an example of how this works.



Case Study: Abby Learns on the Job

New preschool teacher Abby asks her colleague Jayla, a more experienced teacher, to observe in her (Abby's) room as Abby sets up and runs learning centers. Afterwards, Abby and Jayla meet privately. Abby shares her thoughts on how the observation went, and then Jayla offers her own thoughts and suggestions for improvement. A few weeks later, they repeat the observation and discussion to see how Abby's behavior or approach has changed. These types of opportunities to try new techniques in the classroom and to get real-time feedback are key to ensuring that individuals master improved practices.

The challenge, then, becomes determining how to provide job-embedded opportunities for experimentation and feedback. Some early childhood professionals may choose mentoring or coaching, which are extremely effective methods of helping individuals adopt or improve practices. However, each mentor or coach can only work with a small number of people, so if mentors and coaches are not an existing part of an organization and therefore require additional funding, these professional-learning methods can be cost prohibitive. CoPs, on the other hand, can offer support to many individuals at the same time, and their costs can be minimized by leveraging existing resources, such as having existing employees or volunteers serve as facilitators, using meeting spaces or conference-call lines that are already available, or adding CoP-related activities to regularly scheduled meetings. CoPs can also offer many naturally occurring opportunities to get and give feedback and to share resources, tips, and ideas that are "just in time," meaning that a professional can immediately apply that information in her individual practice to address a current problem or situation.

CoPs can effectively complement traditional professional development, but they are often overlooked, particularly in the early childhood field. Through this book, we hope to change that.

How Are CoPs Different from Professional Learning Communities?

At this point, you might ask how CoPs are different from other professional-learning opportunities in which you may have participated. For example, professional learning communities (PLCs) and CoPs are sometimes confused because both groups share information, knowledge, and experience through formal structures, such as team meetings, group dialogue, protocols, or even virtual workspaces. The organizational culture in both types of communities is one of shared vision, with an emphasis on collaboration and trust. However, CoPs and PLCs have critical differences that are important to understand. While both group types have value, they offer practitioners different types of support and learning.

Group Type	Structure	Organizational Culture	Membership	Purpose	Leadership	Knowledge Sharing
Communities of Practice (CoPs)	<p>Team meetings, group dialogue, and virtual workspaces</p> <p>Informal structure</p> <p>Topics, agendas, and frequencies and lengths of meetings set by members</p>	<p>Shared vision</p> <p>Emphasis on collaboration and trust</p>	<p>Voluntary</p> <p>Members share passion, interest, or real-life issue</p>	<p>Improving group members' practices and learning</p>	<p>Formal and informal leaders within CoP</p>	<p>Valued</p> <p>Learning through interaction</p> <p>Members access, create, and share knowledge within CoP</p>
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	<p>Team meetings, group dialogue, and virtual workspaces</p> <p>Formal structure</p> <p>Topics, agendas, and frequencies and lengths of meetings set by administrators based on administrative plans</p>	<p>Shared vision</p> <p>Emphasis on collaboration and trust</p> <p>Members implement same practices outside PLC and report on experiences</p>	<p>Mandatory</p> <p>Often includes an entire school, child-care center, or school district</p>	<p>Meeting student needs</p> <p>Improving student achievement</p>	<p>Principal</p> <p>School administrator</p>	<p>Limited</p> <p>Collaboration</p> <p>No in-depth discussion of how teams create and share new knowledge</p>

How a PLC Works

As researchers Selena Blankenship and Wendy Ruona explain, a PLC is an approach to school improvement instituted by a principal, other administrators, monitors, or a school-wide leadership team. The membership of a PLC includes an entire organization, such as everyone who works in a particular school, department, or district. A PLC focuses on addressing student needs and achievement. The PLC's leadership chooses what the group will study by examining student-achievement data and identifying specific standards for which students are not meeting benchmarks. In an article for *Education World*, Celine Provini notes that a PLC typically uses a defined step-by-step process to improve outcomes.

The PLC approach is a long-term proposition and often takes three to six years to fully incorporate into a program environment. According to Provini, this approach functions best with widespread staff support and often benefits from having an external facilitator who is not also a member of the PLC. This person is usually someone from outside the program environment, though she could also be an administrator or lead teacher. PLC members frequently have a shared mission and values that drive the work, and they use collaborative processes aimed at improving student outcomes. But Blankenship and Ruona indicate that knowledge sharing, a key component of CoPs, is limited in a PLC, which focuses more on getting a group of people to adopt a certain way of thinking or doing things.



Case Study: A PLC on Formative Assessment

One of the authors helped facilitate a PLC for which she and the other external facilitators decided on formative assessment as their topic. They then recruited members whose supervisors had already told them that they needed to improve their practices in this area. While the PLC participants chose what subtopics they wanted to cover within formative assessment, the external facilitators determined the scope of each discussion, what supporting documents and resources to share, and how long the PLC would last. Additionally, the knowledge sharing often went in only one direction, from facilitators or presenters to participants, rather than back and forth between them or among the participants.

How a CoP Works

CoPs focus on expanding the learning and improving the practices of individuals rather than on meeting larger organizational-improvement goals. Blankenship and Ruona assert that membership in a CoP is always voluntary and happens organically, with leadership coming from within the group rather than from external facilitators. The Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education (hereafter the RI Board of Regents) notes that CoPs provide safe and supportive spaces for professionals to share resources and ideas, explore and question their own understandings, solve challenges, and make shared commitments to improve. CoPs are more dynamic than PLCs because the membership and area of study in a CoP may

fluctuate based on individuals' interests and needs for group support. Blankenship and Ruona add that CoPs are more likely than PLCs to build trusting relationships among their members that lead them to share knowledge and innovate. Instead of uniting the members behind a predetermined method or philosophy, a CoP encourages them to pool their expertise to discover what works best for them as individuals.

Importantly, CoPs can provide members with needed professional development that does not fit into organizational-improvement plans. CoPs typically meet outside the workplace, so they do not “steal” work time meant for pursuing improvement plans, and they do not need to report the results of members' participation to administrators or others outside the group. This is not to say that accountability within a program is a bad thing. Indeed, accountability moves a program as a whole toward improvement, and PLCs serve this important purpose. However, accountability often limits exploration and creativity, because people fear what might happen if they “waste” time by examining options and trying new ones and then fail to meet expectations. Given their light or nonexistent accountability requirements, CoPs provide a low-risk environment where members can freely explore and experiment with new practices until they find what works best for them and for the children and families they serve.



Case Study: Pursuing Organizational and Individual Improvement

The program-improvement plan at ABC Early Learning Center includes multiple goals, most importantly a goal to increase children's kindergarten readiness. This goal mandates that all teachers use a certain approach to early literacy, so the center director forms a PLC to help the teachers become proficient in this method. Gabrielle, a toddler teacher, supports this goal but also wants to improve the effectiveness of transitions in her classroom. Several other teachers express similar concerns. However, PLC meetings take up all on-the-job professional-learning time at the center, and the director is unwilling to adjust the schedule to devote time to a topic that does not directly relate to the kindergarten-readiness goal.

As Gabrielle searches for another way to get support for improving her transitions, she discovers a local CoP with this shared interest. She joins the group, where she finds ideas and support from fellow teachers for managing transitions. In this setting, everyone can consider factors specific to individual situations, such as the children in Gabrielle's classroom, the expectations of her program, and her own beliefs about how transitions should work. Gabrielle explores all these issues in depth with other CoP members, who then share ideas and suggestions tailored to her circumstances. By participating in both the PLC and the CoP, she progresses toward her individual professional goals *and* her organization's program-improvement goals.

Examples of CoPs across Sectors

CoPs have been used in a variety of professions besides education, such as business, public health, and social services. These groups provide examples of effectively used CoPs and offer ideas for using CoPs within the early childhood field.

Business

Christopher Pappas, writing for eLearning Industry, states that in the business world, CoPs are created to improve performance and encourage innovative thinking through collaboration and expertise sharing. These CoPs provide mechanisms for innovating, reducing the learning curve for new staff, creating social capital, and adding organizational value, according to researchers Eric Lesser and John Storck. CoPs help develop new strategies and solve company- or industry-wide challenges. They also, as Pappas points out, allow every member to expand her professional knowledge to maximize productivity. The business world demonstrates how CoPs can address common, immediate, everyday challenges.

CoP Benefits Demonstrated by Business CoPs

- Addressing common, immediate, everyday challenges
- Strategically managing knowledge
- Reducing the learning curve for new staff
- Expanding professional knowledge

The following is an example of a CoP used in the business sector, quoted from the *Harvard Business Review* article “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier” by Etienne Wenger and William Snyder.



Case Study: Hewlett-Packard's CoP

[At Hewlett-Packard,] a community of practice consisting of product-delivery consultants from around North America holds monthly teleconferences. The community focuses on an HP software product called High Availability, which minimizes computer downtime for customers. The core group of consultants, who had been somewhat isolated, came together a few years ago with the help of facilitators from a knowledge-management support team. The members discovered that they had many problems in common and that they could learn a great deal from one another. The community has succeeded in standardizing the software's sales and installation processes and establishing a consistent pricing scheme for HP salespeople.

Participation in the monthly calls is voluntary, but levels of attendance are steady. For one such call, the focus was meant to be on Maureen's experiences with a major customer for which she was installing the product. . . .

Maureen hadn't spent a lot of time preparing a formal presentation; she knew that only by talking directly and openly could she spur the give-and-take that would make the call worthwhile for the group. As the call proceeded, community members interrupted her constantly with questions and examples from their own experiences—all of which helped Maureen understand how to work more effectively with her clients.

Wenger and Snyder conclude that participants in this CoP learn from each other by concentrating on issues that directly relate to their work. As a result, the CoP members become more effective individually while creating a set of shared practices that are critical to the corporation's continuing success.

Health Care

The article “How and Why Are Communities of Practice Established in the Health-Care Sector?” by Geetha Ranmuthugala and her colleagues explains that CoPs are used in health care as a means of learning and sharing knowledge and information, changing clinical practices with

patients and promoting the use of best research evidence in these practices, and improving organizational performance. In their report *Communities of Practice in the Health Sector*, Ranmuthugala and her colleagues point out that because of the rapid knowledge advancement in the health-care field, many organizations establish CoPs to

quickly integrate new practices, improve patient safety, and prevent adverse events. Health-care CoPs demonstrate that it is critical to leverage others’ best practices through strong collaboration and sharing. Because CoPs offer many opportunities for feedback and mentoring, these groups can provide an effective, efficient way for professionals to master new and evolving practices.

The following is an example of a CoP used in health care, paraphrased from the article “Thinking Together” by Igor Pyrko, Viktor Dörfler, and Colin Eden.

CoP Benefits Demonstrated by Health-Care CoPs

- Leveraging best practices through collaboration
- Promoting knowledge sharing and knowledge creation across disciplines
- Integrating practices effectively, efficiently, and with support



Case Study: National Health Service Scotland’s CoP

In one hospital of the National Health Service Scotland, the Critical Care Outreach Team, or Outreach Team, recognized a need to help all practitioners better diagnose and treat sepsis, a potentially life-threatening condition that any patient can develop. Though they never formally set up a group, the Outreach Team effectively used a CoP approach to change practices. They showed practitioners how to deal with actual cases of sepsis, mentored junior doctors and junior nurses, organized training courses about sepsis, and convened interdisciplinary meetings to discuss sepsis-related patient cases. The Outreach Team also designed objects to support interdisciplinary communication about sepsis, such as small card sets with key definitions, descriptions of symptoms, and required actions.

Through the Outreach Team’s efforts, practitioners from across the hospital became interested in sepsis because they realized that it could strike their patients in the most unexpected moments. As a result, these professionals genuinely cared about various real-life problems surrounding sepsis and were willing to invest their time in learning more about it.

Mental Health and Social Work

In the mental-health and social-work fields, CoPs aspire to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, retain staff in the field, raise standards of treatment, and improve client care. CoPs in these disciplines offer opportunities for practitioners to share concerns, exchange views about patient treatment, and explore collaborative efforts to improve practice. The Social Service Institute adds that members of these CoPs sharpen their skills, develop bodies of knowledge to benefit their fields, share great ideas, and reflect on practices. Mental-health and social-work CoPs demonstrate the importance of reflection, and they provide examples of how to support both new and experienced practitioners within a field of study.

CoP Benefits Demonstrated by Mental-Health and Social-Work CoPs

- Reflecting on the effectiveness of practices
- Improving the skills of practitioners with various experience levels

The following is an example of a CoP used in mental health, paraphrased from the article “Recovery Communities of Practice” by Myra Piat and her colleagues, published in the journal *Psychiatric Services*.



Case Study: Quebec’s Mental-Health CoP

In the city of Quebec, Canada, a group of managers, service users, practitioners, and researchers formed a CoP in 2012 to help people with mental illness. The CoP seeks to help its members collaborate, exchange knowledge, advocate for change, use a variety of strategies, and improve their practices. Today, the members meet each month to discuss risk management, various services and their levels of quality, how colleagues affect decisions about organizations and patients, and other relevant topics. The more members learn, the more they want to apply their discoveries to their own practices.

Education

Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner are two of the leading experts in the science and use of CoPs. In their article “Introduction to Communities of Practice,” they state that CoPs in education began as a method to support teacher training and peer-to-peer professional development and to provide isolated administrators with access to colleagues. CoPs have been used across educational sectors, particularly in special education. For instance, the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center uses CoPs, which it calls *learning communities*, to address topics related to measuring outcomes and other early childhood subjects.

Visit <http://ectacenter.org/resources/communities.asp> to learn more about the ECTA Center’s use of CoPs.

In most cases, CoPs are used to respond to the quickly changing educational landscape, such as by helping educators implement new evidence-based practices, use systemic-improvement planning (whether at the program level or the state level) in special education, or meet higher requirements for accountability and data collection. At all levels of education, CoPs demonstrate that there is an almost constant need in this field to address challenging situations and implement new practices. CoPs are effective mechanisms to create relationships among colleagues and to address a myriad of topics within a field of study.

This example of a CoP used in education is paraphrased from the research brief *Communities of Practice* by the National Council of Teachers of English.

CoP Benefits Demonstrated by Education CoPs

- Quickly responding to new requirements or initiatives
- Establishing relationships among colleagues
- Addressing multiple topics within a field of study



Case Study: English-Teacher CoP

English teachers must frequently give students feedback on their writing. In this CoP, several English teachers from the same middle school discuss what sorts of comments they write on students' papers. They realize that when encouraging students to develop their ideas, some teachers tend to use fairly broad suggestions, such as "Why?" or "Tell me more." The teachers decide to set a shared goal of customizing their feedback to individual papers or students. The next time they meet, they bring in commented-on papers and subsequent drafts that their students wrote after receiving those comments. These comparisons help the teachers discover how to use formative assessment to increase the quality of students' writing. The CoP also helps these teachers gain the necessary background knowledge to contribute to national, state, and local discussions on writing assessment.

Overview of CoPs in Early Childhood Education

Now that we have seen how CoPs are used across sectors, including in education in general, let's begin exploring how you can use a CoP in the early childhood field. Professionals at all levels of the early childhood system—including classroom teachers; program administrators; specialists (such as early intervention providers, special educators, and speech, physical, and occupational therapists); regional or district leadership; and state early childhood, early intervention, or early childhood special-education leadership—can benefit from participating in CoPs. CoPs can help grow the professionalism, knowledge, and skills of all early childhood practitioners and thus elevate the status of the entire field.

Design Principles

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder have identified seven design principles that, when followed, bring out a CoP's direction, character, and energy and make CoPs successful in changing the practices of participants. These principles are as follows:

- **Design for evolution:** Set up the CoP's structure, policies, and practices in a way that encourages the CoP to continuously evolve according to members' interests and needs.
- **Foster open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives:** Invite contributions to the group's learning from both members and outside sources, such as books or expert presenters.
- **Invite different levels of participation:** Provide various ways for members to participate in and contribute to the group, whether regularly or occasionally.
- **Develop both public and private community spaces:** Use the strength of individual members' relationships to enrich CoP events, and use CoP events to strengthen individual members' relationships.
- **Focus on value:** Create events, activities, and relationships that provide recognizable value, such as support for current needs or contributions to a body of knowledge, to members. See chapters 5 and 6 for more about assessing a CoP's value.
- **Combine familiarity with excitement:** Build a safe space for members to ask for candid advice, share opinions, and try out new ideas. At the same time, plan various interesting events to introduce new ideas to the group, encourage discussion, maintain excitement, and promote professional growth.
- **Create a rhythm for the community:** Use a combination of whole-community and small-group gatherings to create balance between the thrill of exposure to many different ideas and the comfort of more-intimate relationships.

Structural Components

In "Introduction to Communities of Practice," Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner identify three key structural components of successful CoPs:

- Domain
- Community
- Practice

The Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium provides specific definitions for each component. For a CoP, the *domain* is “the general area of interest” (note the difference from domains in early childhood pedagogy, such as social-emotional development). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder further define a domain as the combination of a knowledge base, or broad topic, and a shared interest within that knowledge base. The Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium goes on to say that the *community* is a group of people who “pursue this interest through joint activities, discussions, problem-solving opportunities, information sharing, and relationship building.” The *practice* is “the specific focus around which the community develops, shares, and maintains its core of collective knowledge.” We explore these three components in detail throughout this book.

Sample Early Childhood CoPs

In the early childhood field around the world, CoPs are often used as an alternative or an enhancement to traditional professional-development offerings. These CoPs include people who interact regularly, face corresponding concerns or issues, and share a passion for early childhood education. They offer each other a variety of supports, engage in discussions, and exchange information. Let’s look at some examples.



Case Study: The National Early Childhood Development Community of Practice

In South Africa, the National Early Childhood Development (ECD) Community of Practice began in 2013 because the country’s ECD field needed a strong coordinating mechanism to bring together diverse stakeholders to collectively improve systems, according to the website of educational nonprofit organization BRIDGE. This CoP has grown to include approximately 650 members across all nine provinces of South Africa. As a result of the widespread sharing of knowledge at all levels, the CoP is making a significant contribution to the development of a strong and effective ECD system. BRIDGE’s website quotes one participant: “The CoP has connected me with organisations whose work complements our core work but adds a different dimension (such as a focus on early learning barriers) [that] we need in our programmes.” The National ECD CoP is larger than most CoPs, but because the group focuses on improving early childhood across an entire nation, this CoP is an effective mechanism for creating a community across a large population of professionals.

Other CoPs in early childhood are smaller and more focused. The following two examples illustrate this type of CoP.



Case Study: DaSy

In the United States, sections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) set out standards for special-education and early intervention professionals who work with young children. The Center for IDEA Early Childhood Data Systems (DaSy) offers CoPs where these providers can share lessons learned and promising practices in early intervention and preschool special-education data and data systems. Through these CoPs, DaSy engages state leaders, provides expert facilitation, and develops resources that benefit both the CoP participants and other professionals who face similar challenges.

Each DaSy CoP has ten to thirty members. This size provides an opportunity for the participants to delve deeply into topics of interest. For example, the Data Visualization CoP has thoroughly explored many low- or no-cost tools to create different ways of charting or graphing data based on audience and data type.



Case Study: The Early Learning Leadership Initiative

In 2013, the US state of Delaware used a CoP framework to form the Early Learning Leadership Initiative (ELLI). This initiative provided participating early childhood educators with enhanced learning experiences and support to earn the national director credential as part of the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Participants throughout the state met monthly and face-to-face for nine months to enhance the learning experience and complete the requirements for the credential, as Maria Edgerton of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership reports. As a result, the participants created a community of individuals with similar jobs who would otherwise be isolated and not easily able to share ideas, ask for help, or collaborate on critical daily issues. The ability to do these things with others who “get it” is invaluable to those who participate in any CoP.

Feedback from an ELLI Participant

“I had no idea how beneficial the ELLI meetings would be. . . . It was so nice to be with people who could relate and truly understand the same daily challenges I face. The interactions with other directors were priceless. These meetings impacted me so much that I asked if anyone else in the group wished to continue our monthly meetings. Thankfully . . . one hundred percent of the class agreed to continue to meet. I am looking forward to continuing my relationships with my professional peers!”

—Heather Wilson, director of Brandywine Valley Christian Preschool and Kindergarten, quoted in *Communities of Practice: A Glimpse into Delaware* by Maria Edgerton

Chapter 1 Study Guide

Based on the definitions and information about CoPs and PLCs that have been presented so far, what CoPs and/or PLCs have you participated in?

What were the outcomes of each group? the benefits? the challenges?

If you have participated in both PLCs and CoPs, what differences did you notice between them?

Build your COMMUNITY

Communities of practice are an age-old phenomenon representing teamwork. Whether it's researchers developing treatments for a disease, artists collaborating to create a new art form, or educators sharing best practices to enhance early childhood learning, communities of practice are about connection and shared purpose.

Growing Together: Developing and Sustaining a Community of Practice in Early Childhood will help you define, create, and promote a community of practice to foster collaborative problem-solving and enhance professional learning experiences.

You will learn key strategies and techniques to help you:

- Develop a shared vision and structure
- Leverage tools to invite members and build a community
- Build member engagement and investment
- Master facilitation and evaluation strategies to ensure ongoing professional development

Featuring a workbook format, *Growing Together* offers tips, real-life experiences, and educator-tested strategies for developing and sustaining successful communities of practice.

Growing Together will guide you as you find your people and explore, experiment, and strategize your way to an enhanced career in early education.



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