

Sustainability of community practice

What does it take to develop sustainable community practices that include community members working to grow up healthy and happy children?

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This article is drawn from my experience and the collective experience of the projects that the Stronger Families Learning Exchange has worked with over the last three years. Most definitions include an understanding that sustainability is about retaining what we have and building services and structures that will be available to community members for a long period to come.

Sustainability can be understood both in relation to processes and content. Sustainable processes are ways of working and organising that are inclusive, participatory, flexible, persistent and adaptable. The content of projects might include the reaching of specified outcomes that are community owned, adequately resourced, and demonstrate respect for diverse cultural values. Lyons, Smuts and Stephens (2001: 1237) provide a definition of sustainability that is broad enough to include content, process and the more familiar economic aspects of sustainability:

“We define sustainable development as the ability acquired and held by communities over time to initiate, and control development thus enabling communities to participate more effectively in their own destiny.”

This definition is relevant to community practice work as it adds a dimension of community control that is relevant to the continuation of community projects.



Wadsworth (1978) was working with communities to develop models of integrated early childhood services in the City of Knox in the late 1970s, as were many other community practitioners. The focus on the early years and community in current policy directions could do well to ask if there is anything about past policy initiatives that we may have forgotten rather than re-inventing the wheels of community practice. Furthermore, we do need to acknowledge that the concept and our understanding of “community” changes over time and relates to interest, place, sense of belonging and culture (Smith 2004; Ife 2002; Edgar 2002).

Community practice is of course concerned with the economic sustainability of projects and some community based organisations are looking into business opportunities and linking with larger organisations

that may be able to offer longer term funding for their activities. However this should not become the main aim of community practice. The complexity of establishing and maintaining services/programs/projects that are both stable and flexible is most reliably achieved through active citizen/parental participation.

Action research approaches contribute significantly to the building of sustainable community practice with early childhood development projects because they introduce reflection and accountability before the end of projects.

All of the projects SFLEX has worked with have an element of community participation often in the form of community based reference groups. All of the projects have used action research to make changes, grow links and networks and redesign projects and programs if the evidence and

with early years projects

experience of community members suggests such directions.

The changes outlined by projects in each SFLEX Bulletin are testimony to this practice.

Actual and potential skills and resources

All communities have a pool of actual and potential skills and resources and using those skills both develops and maintains their sustainability.

Skills acquired during the funded cycle of projects might include engaging with parents, linking different groups in the community to share information and resources, running meetings, minute taking, computer skills, catering, interviewing, reporting back from meetings, report writing, public speaking, organising meetings and groups, pooling or bringing in extra resources, developing participatory strategies and outreach.

These skills can be seen more broadly as the social capital of the community and as with economic capital making the best use of social capital improves its value to the whole community. Some of the broader assets that communities develop include the following.

- The ability to negotiate with external agencies and institutions, representing a diversity of views, increasing knowledge and understanding of themselves.
- Research and project management skills in the development processes for projects – setting up office, getting the money, setting up accounting and reporting processes; and in the maintenance and future of projects – applying for ongoing grants, and linking with existing services.
- Developing partnerships: the skills and experience of developing and maintaining partnerships contribute to sustainability and build the confidence and social capital of community members.

Elements for reaching sustainable outcomes

Developing dynamic, connected, diverse and nurturing communities would seem an obvious task in working to assist children to reach their full potential. It requires communities, policy makers and researchers to:

- reach a shared vision;
- share that vision and involve more and more participants;
- be open to revisiting the vision regularly;
- be flexible and able to move along;
- recognise the meaning and *value of "local knowledge"* about community networks and processes;
- develop skills to enhance, negotiate and mediate different interests;
- *share expert knowledge* about child development;
- develop community practice skills with local community members and learn from their experience; and
- be open and innovative about how to enhance parenting, family support and the nurturing of babies and young children.

It is a given that all parents and families want the best for their children. The current moves towards a whole of government response to service provision requires current service providers and managers to build bridges across service sectors and to assist the staff working within them to remain engaged with community members.

The crux of good sustainable community practice in the early years

The relevance of the early years knowledge base and good practice examples of how to share and implement that information in community settings are the crux of good sustainable community practice in the early years. If based upon sound knowledge and good processes that achieve participation, many of the

early years projects will not only survive, but thrive and continue to develop. In addition, many of them will be able to articulate models of working that will be valuable to community members, service providers, researchers, policy makers and community practice educators.

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