Sources of Information about Communities of Practice

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Abstract

Selected references to information about communities of practice are included in this *CASEmaker*. As used in this paper, community of practice includes early childhood practitioners (speech pathologists, physical therapists, early childhood educators, early interventionists, etc.) with a common desire to improve the ways in which they learn about and implement evidence-based practices. The source material in this bibliography provides a foundation for understanding the theoretical foundations of a community of practice approach for improving practitioner performance. The source material should be useful to practitioners for supporting one another in adopting and using evidence-based early childhood intervention practices.

This *CASEmakers* bibliography includes selected references to different conceptual and operational features of a community of practice (CoP) approach to staff and organizational development (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs include practitioners who share a common interest in a specific practice, area of knowledge, or set of competencies, and who over a period of time, learn together to develop and share that knowledge with one another and other practitioners (www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit/asp). Members of a CoP share their knowledge in different ways to foster novel approaches to solving problems and improving the practices constituting the focus of the CoP. CoPs provide a context for ongoing opportunities for collaborative reflection and inquiry through practice-related dialogue and supplemental product and tool development (Wesley & Buysse, 2001).

CoPs share a basic structure: A *domain of knowledge* which creates common ground and common knowledge within the community, a *community* which serves as a social context of learning, and the *practice* (frameworks, tools, ideas, information, styles, language, and documents) that the community members share with one another. The *Prescription for Practice* lists four articles that readers should find especially helpful for understanding the use of a CoP specifically for the field of early childhood intervention.

Supporting children and families as part of early childhood intervention is a complex and multifaceted process that requires practitioners to view children in the context of their families and in the larger context of their community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A broader-based view of early childhood education requires changes and shifts in practitioner roles and functions. Accordingly, practitioners are challenged to remain aware of a wide array of new family support and early intervention knowledge and skills. CoPs are forums where practitioners benefit from the experience and expertise of other group members (i.e., situated learning). The use of CoPs as contexts for promoting practitioners' continuous learning and adoption and use of evidence-based early childhood intervention practices is one focus of utilization research at the Center for Advanced Study of Excellence (CASE) in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices (www.fippcase.org).

Buysse, V., Sparkman, K., & Wesley, P. (2003). Communities of practice: Connecting what we know with what we do. *Exceptional Children, 69*(3), 264-277.

Buysse, V., Wesley, P., & Skinner, D. (1999). Community development approaches for early intervention. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 19,* 236-243.

Lave, J. (1996). The practice of learning. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 3-32). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rx   Prescription for Practice   Rx

Improve your knowledge and understanding of communities of practice and how they can be used to promote practitioner adoption of evidence based practices in early intervention by reading the following:

Buysse, V., Sparkman, K., & Wesley, P. (2003). Communities of practice: connecting what we know with what we do. *Exceptional Children, 69*(3), 264-277.

Buysse, V., Wesley, P. W., & Skinner, D. (1999). Community development approaches for early intervention. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 19,* 236-243.

Palincsar, A., Magnusson, S., Marano, N., Ford, D., & Brown, N. (1998). Designing a community of practice: Principles and practices of the GIsML community. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(1), 5-19.

Wesley, P.W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of practice: Expanding professional roles to promote reflection and shared inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 2*(21), pp. 114-121.

Characteristics and Features

While CoPs share some similarities with other types of groups, there are characteristics and features of CoPs that distinguish them from teams, workgroups or other types of groups. For example, because members of a CoP volunteer to be a group member, they more likely feel a stronger sense of identity with and attachment to the community. Participants in the CoP become more competent by implementing practices along side other members of the community. CoPs produce learning through participation in the community which is defined as "the mobilization and adaptation of tools and other resources that enable action" (Iedema, Meyerkort, & White, 2005, pp. 21-22). The following references should be particularly helpful in understanding the key characteristics and features of CoPs.

Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. M. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. In D. H. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments* (pp. 25-55). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Englert, C., & Rozendal, M. (2004). A model of professional development in special education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 27*(1), 24-46.

McDermott, R. (1999, May/June). Learning across teams: The role of communities of practice in team organizations. *Knowledge Management Review, 8,* 32-36.

McDermott, R. (2001). *Knowing in community: Ten critical success factors in building communities of practice: The limits of knowledge management.* Retrieved on January 15, 2004, from http://www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/knowing.html

Nickols, F. (2000). *Communities of practice: Definition, indicators and identifying characteristics.* Retrieved on July 26, 2002, from http://home.att.net/~discon/KM/CoPCharacteristics.htm

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Conceptualization

CoPs are based on theories of situated social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where the individual is constantly influenced by the wider world in which that individual participates. For example, in the context of a CoP, learning, thinking, and knowing develops out of relationships with other practitioners who are engaged in the same or similar practices where they are performed in the everyday contexts of early childhood intervention. The following references include information on the theoretical foundations of CoPs.

Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. M. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. In D. H. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments* (pp. 25-55). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Wesley, P.W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of practice: Expanding professional roles to promote reflection and shared inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 2*(21), pp. 114-121.

Utilization

CoPs have their roots in the business community where much has been written about the usefulness of CoPs (e.g., Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The use of CoPs as contexts for adult learning is relatively new to early childhood intervention where one- and two-day trainings continue to dominant continuing education practices. However, interest in CoPs for early childhood intervention has recently shifted away from simply understanding the meaning of CoPs to creating and sustaining these kinds of learning groups as contexts for improving practice (Wesley & Buysse, 2001).

Since *community* can be defined broadly with few restrictions, the parameters or boundaries of a CoP can vary greatly. CoPs can develop within an organization, across organizations, and even across countries with the use of internet capabilities. For example, a CoP could include only speech pathologists that serve young children in a designated catchment area. Alternatively, a CoP could be a group of early childhood practitioners from different disciplines interesting in improving their practices with young children. This group could be made up of practitioners working for different early intervention programs or the same program. The following references include examples of CoPs in various fields, including early childhood education.

Barab, S. A., Barnett, M., & Squire, K. (2002). Developing an empirical account of a community of practice: Characterizing the essential tensions. *Journal of the Learning Scientist, 11,* 489-543.

Evenbeck, S., & Kahn, S. (2001, May/June). Enhancing learning assessment and accountability through communities of practice. *Change, 33*(3), 24-26.

Lesser, E. L., & Storck, J. (2001). Communities of practice and organizational performance. *IBM Systems Journal, 40,* 831-841.

Palincsar, A., Magnusson, S., Marano, N., Ford, D., & Brown, N. (1998). Designing a community of practice: Principles and practices of the GIsML community. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 14*(1), 5-19.

Saint-Onge, H., & Wallace, D. (2003). *Leveraging communities of practice for strategic–advantage.* Boston: Butterworth Heinemann.

Stamps, D. (1997). Learning is social: Training is irrelevant? *Training, February,* 35-42.

Waddock, S. A., & Walsh, M. (1999). Paradigm shift: Toward a community-university community of practice. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 7,* 244-264.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Young, S., & Mitchell, J. (2003, April). *Putting more practice into communities of practice.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA), Sydney, Australia.

Potential Benefits

Information on the benefits of CoPs can be found in a number of sources (e.g., Millen, Fontaine, & Muller, 2002). The benefits of participating in a CoP include, but are not limited to, access to expertise across and within organizations, support for practitioners to remain current about knowledge that is available in the field, development of practitioner skills and competencies, and opportunities to experience challenges and chances to contribute to improved practice. Several sources that should be useful to readers interested in the benefits of CoPs include:

Millen, D. R., Fontaine, M. A., & Muller, M. J. (2002). Understanding the benefits and costs of communities of practice. *Communications of the ACM, 45*(4), 1-9.

Saint-Onge, H., & Wallace, D. (2003). *Leveraging communities of practice for strategic–advantage.* Boston: Butterworth Heinemann.

Liebler, C. J. (2005). Getting comfortable with appreciative inquiry. Global Social Innovations: *The Journal of the GEM Initiative, 1*(2).

Conclusion

A number of sources of information were included in this *CASEmaker* that provide background information about communities of practices (CoPs). As noted in the introduction, CoPs include practitioners who share a common interest in a specific practice, area of knowledge, or set of competencies, and who over a period of time, learn together to develop and share that knowledge with one another as well as others.

Practitioners supporting children and families often and usually do benefit from collaboration among many people and/or agencies. The purpose of a CoP is to develop shared practices and philosophies across disciplines and agencies with regard to desired practices (e.g., natural learning environment interventions, family-centered practices, and culturally-competent practices). In addition, a CoP approach commits participants to a process by which the community continually questions and refines their practices and philosophies. CoPs seem especially applicable to early childhood intervention programs which would provide practitioners ongoing training opportunities in order to effectively learn about and implement evidence-based early childhood intervention practices (e.g., (Dunst, 2005).

References

Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. M. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. In D. H. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments* (pp. 25-55). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dunst, C. J. (2005). Framework for practicing early childhood intervention and family support. *CASEinPoint, 1*(1), 1-11.

Iedema, R., Meyerkort, S., & White, L. (2005). Emergent modes of work and communities of practice. *Health Sciences Management Research, 18*(1), 13-24.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Wesley, P.W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of practice: Expanding professional roles to promote reflection and shared inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 2*(21), pp. 114-121.

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