The Early Years Connect Project
Early Years Connect is a multi-stakeholder project that is driven by the shared vision of enhancing collaboration within the early years sector, with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for all children and families. Developed in partnership with Wiltshire Local Authority, The Mead Teaching School, Collaborative Schools Ltd, and supported initially by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, Early Years Connect is driven by the vision to enhancing collaboration within the early years sector, with the aim of improving outcomes for all children and families.

In this cycle of support, Early Years Connect identified settings for support that had an Ofsted grading of one or two, since the support and accountability of the Local Authority is focused on those settings with a grade of three or four. To engage in the project, as a setting receiving an EYPDP, is totally voluntarily and free of charge.

Scopes and Objectives

The project aims to establish a system-led approach to early years improvement that offers potentially different ways of seeing and interpreting practices and to provide a different evidence base from which to gain professional understanding and effective practice. Acting as ‘critical friends’, the EYPDPs support and mentor other practitioners to bring about practical improvement, innovation and change, enabling practitioners to have a better understanding of their practices.

The notion of joint practice development is not new to the sector. The introduction of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), and more recently, the Early Years Teacher (EYT), acknowledges a recognised need for reflective lead practitioners to both identify the key elements of good practice in their own and others work, and to share these with their colleagues (CWDC, 2007). There are, however, several key elements of the Early Years Connect project that are fundamental to its approach.

Joint practice development is not new to the sector. The introduction of professional status, and Early Years Teachers, acknowledges a need for reflective lead practitioners to identify the key elements of good practice in their own and others work, and to share these with their colleagues.
for the delivery of high quality provision; are willing to
discuss and critique their own practice; and display an
aptitude for ‘integrated working’.

Evaluation
The evaluation of the Early Years Connect project focused
on the impact of this early years improvement strategy in
the following areas:
• Developing EYPDP leadership capacity and reflecting
  on their professional learning journey.
• The contribution of the EYPDPs in raising quality and
developing practice in their own, and in their support,
  settings.
• The effectiveness of networking and arranging visits
  between settings to promote collaborative learning.

Data collection
Impact data was drawn from evidence using a qualitative
approach. EYPDPs were asked to complete a Note of
Visit (NoV) after each setting visit and all kept a learning
journal to use as a reflective practice tool. Additionally,
the end-of-cycle ‘celebration’ event provided an
opportunity to ‘hear’ what participants said about the
process, to elicit their views, and to gather their reflective
and emotional responses.

At the event, the participants were supported to ‘tell
their stories’ (Silverman, 2010) and to gather qualitative
data (Newby, 2014). This reflects an interpretive
paradigm of evaluation, where ‘efforts are made to get
inside the person and to understand from within’ (Cohen
et al, 2007). This method allowed participants to choose
information that was important and of value to them.

All settings that received the support of an EYPDP
were asked to complete an ‘Exit Report’. The report,
completed by the EYPDP in collaboration with the
setting manager, enables progress against previously
identified outcomes/next steps/outstanding actions to
be recorded, as well as ideas for future developments
to be identified. Where available, performance data
from the Wiltshire Early Years Tracker was analysed to
indicate improved outcomes for children/attainment
gap narrowed. The Ofsted profile of settings was also
considered, noting accelerated progress for settings
serving disadvantaged families.

Key findings
‘Experience provides a rich resource of practice narratives;
stories of practice which can be shared. These have the
potential to stimulate and inform dialogue, critical
thinking, reflective learning and bring about change.’
(Hanson et al, 2016)

Professional development
When discussing their motivations for becoming
involved in the project, what became immediately

EYPDPs are required to coach and mentor staff to enable
a rich enabling environment across all areas of learning
and support staff to identify barriers to learning and
develop intervention practice.
apparent was the value the EYPDPs placed on their own learning and skills, and the recognition that the benefits to being involved in the project are two-way. All of the EYPDPs strongly agreed that being in the role has supported their own professional development. A typical response was: ‘I loved having the opportunity to activate my own brain cells and to learn more about early years practice through networking with the other EYPDPs. It has stopped me from stagnating.’

Each one of the EYPDPs welcomed the opportunity to engage in continuing professional development, with the practice development visit to a well regarded outdoor nursery being particularly highly valued. Reflecting on the enabling environment, the role of the adult and the children’s learning, participants made the following observations:

- ‘Speech and language skills were noticeably advanced due to the amount of time given to negotiating and problem solving.’
- ‘The children were all learning in a calm and purposeful way; given they ranged from six-months to four-years, this was particularly noticeable. I reflected that, because they have access to the outdoor environment at all times there wasn’t that need to run round and try everything or to desperately cling to the bikes/fall out with friends over resources because they were always available.’
- ‘I heard lots of open-ended questioning, use of modelled sentences, and staff supporting negotiating to support independence.’

Such responses show the benefit of visiting another setting and the power of reflecting on the outcomes of the visit in a collaborative way. Participants were keen to report where changes to their own settings would be made. As one of them put it: ‘In conclusion, it was amazing! We are going to extend the times our children access the outdoor area with a true “no bad weather” approach… I feel so inspired by what we’ve seen today and how this approach could really benefit our children.’

Professional identity

Given that one of the essential criteria for the role of the EYPDP is to be ‘a well organised and efficient professional, confident in their own abilities, with an ability to support and challenge peers and colleagues’ it is perhaps not surprising that ‘professionalism’ was mentioned in some degree by all participants.

One EYPDP felt very strongly that taking on the role had helped her view herself as a professional that could legimitely share her knowledge and, therefore, take on the role of a ‘critical friend’ in her support setting: ‘The fact that the role brings recognition of your own abilities to identify the key elements of good practice in your own work makes you more confident to share these with other colleagues.’

Another participant concluded that she had really enjoyed the opportunity to be part of the project and highlighted, in particular: ‘Sharing ideas with like-minded professionals.’

All of the EYPDPs explicitly articulated their commitment to inclusive democratic practices and recognised the possible ‘constraining’ nature of a ‘top down’ approach to mentoring practices, taking as their premises the view of the construction of knowledge as defined by the social constructivists, who believe that learning takes place through a process of ‘social interactions and relationships with others’ (Dalliberg et al, 1999).

Given their recognised strengths in early years practice, it is perhaps not surprising that the EYPDPs draw on the same pedagogical practices and promote the potential of shared ‘learning conversations’ in ‘supporting’ and ‘transforming’ professional knowledge, just as they would when describing effective adult engagement with children (Sylva et al, 2004).

‘The most important aspect of my role was to be a sounding board for the manager. We talked about her vision and I supported her thoughts and suggested ideas. This demonstrates that we can all provide different forms of strength and support to each other.’

Professional dialogue

The danger of practitioners and, particularly, managers feeling isolated in their role is a recurring theme highlighted in the discussion of the EYPDPs. It is captured really well by one of them: ‘My experience here has evidenced the loneliness of the role of an early years manager, even within a private nursery, which has an involved and supportive team. It supports my thoughts on the necessity of networking and how our personal visions need clarity from an eternal source.’

EYPDPs frequently commented on their own sense of professional isolation within their settings or reflected this back from their support settings. They highlighted the strength of the EYPDP process in developing collegial relationships and in encouraging reflective practice based in cooperative adult learning.

One EYPDP observed: ‘The manager kept saying things like, “It’s so nice to be able to talk to you and know that is what you think too”.’ She just needed me to say, “That’s great I agree with you” or “that’s what I think too”.’

A noticeable feature of this project was the enabling of links, networks and connections to be made between the EYPDPs themselves. Typical reflections included:

- ‘The most rewarding bit for me was the shared practice and connection with the other EYPDPs. We developed a really good “sounding board” forum.’
- ‘I really valued the networking – we provided strength and ideas for each other.’

Edwards and Rose (1994) identify important outcomes for a group of early years teachers who had been involved in such ‘action research’ together. They found that through the exploration of their own practice and ongoing reflection, the teachers developed ‘important new understandings about themselves and the children; understandings… that had, and will continue to have, significant impact on their practice.’

The EYPDPs echoed this collaborative approach, recognising the impact when both parties contribute to the thinking. One EYPDP explained: ‘I have never believed in working in isolation. It is so important to
share and celebrate practice, to learn from your mistakes and to develop and extend your understanding together. I call this “healthy practice”. You can reflect on the strengths and challenges of your own setting, not just to copy, but to reflect on what is best practice and what is relevant and appropriate for you to change.’

**Inspiring and leading others**  
EYPDPs are not only expected to have a proven track record of good practice themselves, but also to have ‘an ability to support and challenge peers and colleagues along with the skills to inspire and lead others’ [Person Specification EYPDP] and, in terms of how the project developed the EYPDP’s leadership capacity, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

- ‘I have become more aware of the necessity of being clear and concise in both expectations and understanding.’
- ‘I truly feel that this project is inspiring in its development of enthusiastic, knowledgeable leaders who are driving forward the need for good and excellent practice in the local area.’

A number of EYPDPs attribute ‘increased confidence’ to undertaking the role, helping to make them more ‘self-aware and conscious of their own practice’ (Clark and Baylis, 2010). As a result, they are more able to justify and rationalise what they do:

- ‘I’ve gained confidence in my knowledge and hope this will continue to grow and I’ll be able to share with my setting, I have a much deeper understanding of my role.’
- ‘Discussing and sharing ideas with others from across a range of different settings is stimulating and has created increased levels of confidence in my ability to lead and change practice.’

The EYPDPs agreed that their role had enabled them to influence the practice of another setting and there are examples of where, even when work within support settings has been challenging, the EYPDP has been able to affect change and development in staff. The EYPDPs attribute this to the learning opportunities the project has offered and their own increased confidence as ‘leaders’:

- ‘My support with the planning will enable the children’s interests to be extended and next steps to be achieved. Since my last visit, the team had created a three-stage photographic visual timetable for the two-year-old session. It was good to see this in use during my visit.’

The exchange visits arranged by the EYPDPs to their own or another EYPDPs’ settings were also celebrated as being really valuable in terms of shaping and influencing practice: ‘After the visit, I went home buzzing with ideas and very excited. The staff were able to see how visual aids worked in the toddler unit. I saw them use the techniques and visual book in their own setting.’

A nursery manager commented: ‘Thank you for the invitation to visit your setting. It was so valuable for me to be able to see first-hand how another setting operates. I was really inspired by the practitioner’s activity on listening and attention.’

Clark and Baylis (2010) advocate the use of Whalley’s (2008) concept of ‘constructive discontent’ (2008) in underpinning a role that necessarily demands ‘constantly questioning and challenging practice in order to improve provision.’ This resonates in the experiences of the EYPDPs:

- ‘Through my observations I was concerned that the two-year-olds were perhaps getting a “watered down” version of the three and four-year-olds sessions. I believe the staff would benefit from finding out about more specific practice for two-year-olds.’
- ‘The adults within the toddler room are less likely to be at the level of the child, less likely to be engaged

The role of the EYPDP is instrumental in the delivery of Early Years Connect to establish and further develop a culture of peer support and challenge.
with groups and with the children. Why is this? I feel the staff are very stretched and lack a sense of ownership in their environment and their role and responsibilities… (there needs to be an) emphasis on supporting them with their learning journeys, planning and next steps.’

The EYPDPs agreed that their own setting had benefited from their deployment as an EYPDP and all of them agreed that this, in turn, had a direct impact on the children’s learning. Moreover, they all agreed that their role had positively impacted on the children’s learning in their support setting. One EYPDP commented: ‘It was much easier on this deployment to see the improvements being made and, therefore, to judge my impact. I could see the manager implementing changes and the difference this was making to the children.’

Headlines drawn from the Wiltshire Early Years Tracker confirm improvement in both mathematical aspects (Number and Shape, Space and Measure) for all support settings, with two showing an increase in over 30 percent, from their relative starting points. Data confirms that all support settings showed significant increases in the number of children working at age-related expectations in PSED and elements of Communication and language. Similarly, in three of the support settings, reading also improved between 13-25 percent from their relative starting points (Source: Wiltshire Advisory Teacher, December 2017).

The evidence provided here shows that the EYPDP, as specialised ‘experts’ or ‘leaders’ has been fundamental in improving provision. As one EYPDP puts it: ‘Through our understandings of early years we are helping to share ways of improving and moving practice forward.’

Reflecting on practice

‘By taking a more agentic stance in evaluating their own practice, practitioners will be empowered to articulate their own definitions of good practice.’ [Dyer, 2013]

The EYPDPs present a strong argument for reflective dialogue as a central dimension to the success of their deployment – a common theme is the benefit derived from the opportunity for reflection and learning. One EYPDP confirmed: ‘The process is really valuable when you have the right people working together and affecting change.’

The experience of one EYPDP suggests that for reflection to be an empowering process the practitioner needs the confidence and self-awareness to question, moving from the ‘victimic stance’ of simply accepting and following, to a more ‘agentic position’ (Johns, 2010). ‘I was disappointed that the manager of the setting seemed unable to reflect on her daily practice, often giving negative reasons why things could not change or happen in a different way, instead of being positive about change.’

The experience of the other EYPDPs shows that participants were comfortable discussing their practice together, as in the examples of the discussions of sharing planning among the team and regarding outdoor play. These exchanges suggested openness and a willingness to share understandings of practice.

Relationships matter

‘An equal trusting relationship cannot be forced. It takes time and effort on both parts to create. Partnership involves mutual involvement and mutual respect.’ [Rinaldi, 2006]

The significance of liaising closely with other professionals was a dimension of the project that was regarded by all of the EYPDPs as ‘potentially challenging’. One EYPDP describes the first meeting of her support setting as ‘really disappointing’. ‘When we arrived, the manager commented that she wasn’t expecting us – we didn’t think we were going to be able to get over the threshold.’

The same EYPDP, following several more visits, goes on to conclude: ‘We just needed time to build a connection and for a relationship to develop. By the end of the process the manager was so much more willing to talk and reflect. She implemented several of my suggestions and said she really valued my feedback.’

The EYPDPs were clear that the first meeting was crucial in terms of building trust and setting the tone of the relationship. ‘Before becoming someone’s “critical friend”, you have to build up a relationship with them first. When I went to the first meeting, I had not met the manager before. After a few meetings, we got to know each other better. My experience was that to build a strong relationship, it is important that we showed strong interest in the setting and tried to be as helpful as possible.’

The Local Authority early years advisory teacher echoed the importance of an effective working relationship and described the ‘match making’ process undertaken when an EYPDP is deployed to a setting: ‘From the outset, we look to see who has had common interests by professional experience or type of setting. The benefits of this approach are manifold. Not only could ideas and resources be shared, we are also developing a community of like-minded professionals interested in early years practice and development.

‘Apart from bringing partners into contact with others with similar interests, we also tried to find those who had the appropriate professional reputation. For one setting, it was important, for example, that they had an EYPDP who was a SENCO. Such “match-making” is a really rigorous process. It relies on us knowing the strengths of our EYPDP team and the needs of the setting. It has not always been an easy process because it also depends largely on the personality of such persons – we do take that into consideration too. Another way we bring them together is through locality and region. Sometimes, it is important that they come from outside the local area because they can bring a truly fresh pair of eyes.’

Recommendations/next steps

‘It’s like moving into a new house and having all the benefits of looking around with fresh eyes to see what you like and what you think needs to change.’ [EYPDP]

This report has highlighted the benefits of designating EYPDPs to work alongside identified settings through the co-construction of an ‘inclusive approach’ to practice
development. As one EYPDP succinctly concludes: ‘The project has enabled me to further my own CPD and learning development, share my expertise, and to work in partnership to shape and support practice.’

The report also highlights possible directions of practice for the project, which could support it to develop and grow. These are based on the project’s current strengths in relation to the literature explored and the evidence presented:

- The CPD and networking opportunities for the EYPDPs are a fundamental part of their role. Utilising the use of internet forums would perhaps enable professional dialogue to take place across wider geographical boundaries. In addition, the EYPDPs would be well placed, in partnership with the LA, to set up networks to lead new early years developments.
- This project promotes reflection as a dynamic and continual process for improvement. EYPDPs should continue to introduce settings to specific aspects of reflection and to particular reflective theory to enhance their understanding of their practice and their values.
- While discussion of the importance of securing effective relationships between the EYPDPs and their support settings has been acknowledged, from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, the most important relationship for any educator is, of course, with parents and carers who have long been recognised as ‘children’s first and most enduring educators’ (DfE 2007). Consideration could be given now to how the ‘community of practice’ can involve the EYPDPs taking a more active role in promoting the partnership with parents/carers to improve outcomes for their children. In addition, gathering impact data from parent/carers in the support setting would add a new and comprehensive dimension to the evaluation of the EYPDP role.
- Equally, including the ‘voice of the child’ is seen to be essential as an ethical principle (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011) when reflecting on early years practice and provision. Seeking the child’s perspectives will help the EYPDPs and support setting practitioners to reflect on the provision in an inclusive and rights respecting manner, and to provide further impact evidence.

**Conclusion**

The last decade has seen huge changes in the field of the early years. The creation of a new category of professionals, the EYPDP as specialised ‘experts’ could be fundamental to this. Those facilitating changes in practice in other contexts would do well to consider the potential benefits from adopting the particular strategies examined here.

**References**

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