

Standards and training for work with parents across Europe: Successes and challenges in developing a community of practice

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Title

**Exchanging standards and training for work with parents across Europe:
Successes and challenges**

Abstract

This paper examines processes and outcomes arising from an illuminative evaluation of a Leonardo da Vinci funded project designed to develop a transnational network in Europe for practitioners working with parents. The project aimed to share knowledge of and support the development of training, qualification and occupational standards in the sector. The scope for harmonisation of these across Europe or between individual countries was also under consideration. The intention was to establish this network through an international meeting, a new web site, e- groups, personal contacts and conferences in each of the host nations. The project was successful in enabling information to be shared between the partners, in supporting individual partners to implement their own specific goals and in publicising the needs of the sector more widely. It was less successful in establishing common frameworks for practice in this area. Overall partners showed a marked preference for personal contacts and the electronic forms of communication were little used. The reasons for this are examined.

Key words

Communities of practice, parenting education and support, training, web-based partnerships

Introduction

This paper reports on outcomes and processes from a transnational collaboration that aimed to develop sustainable channels of communication and exchange for the promotion of work with parents in Europe. ‘Parenting in the 21st Century’ was a Leonardo da Vinci-funded project from 2003-7 between 14 organisations from nine different European countries working in a range of areas relating to the parenting support and education sector. The project aimed to improve the skills of practitioners working with parents by sharing information about vocational training and occupational standards available in the member countries and by working towards shared values and principles underpinning this work. It planned to achieve this through: the establishment of a website where curricula, training programmes and standards could be shared; e groups and personal contacts between members; and dissemination conferences.

In essence, the project sought to establish through ‘mutual engagement’ in ‘joint enterprises’ a transnational community of practice (Wenger 1998: 73) for agencies and practitioners working with parents. During the three years of the project’s duration interesting dynamics emerged around partners’ use (or non-use) of particular forms of communication, particularly of the project website and its online discussion groups. The advantages and difficulties of using different communication strategies and technologies may not be particular to this project and, perhaps, reflect broader themes in the organisation of transnational professional networks. The story of this project may be of value to people from different disciplines wishing to build work-related transnational ties with each other, as well as organisations and individuals specifically concerned with parenting education and support.

Service Sector Organisations and Social Policy Development in Europe

The Leonardo da Vinci Community Vocational Training Action Programme fosters mobility and innovation in the field of vocational training and funds projects to develop vocational standards and qualifications in the European Union. The EU has a long-standing tradition of promoting the amelioration of occupational standards and qualifications on a European-wide level. Given the legal and cultural complexities of national labour markets and their regulation, however, ambitions have shifted from the pursuit of sector harmonisation in the 1950s and 60s to the promotion of occupational transparency, or “the visibility of qualifications among the Member States”, in the 1990s (Deane, 2005; Gordon, 1999: 203). The discursive shift from harmonisation to transparency reflects the increased responsibility of service sector organisations and social partnerships in shaping policy (Billet & Seddon, 2004). This is articulated in the concept of subsidiarity – the empowerment of local agencies to resolve problems at the lowest level possible (Payne, 2006).

Parenting Education and Support in Europe

Parenting education and support involves the provision of a variety of learning and supportive activities for parents and others in a parental role, designed to enhance understanding of their own and their children’s needs. For instance, it includes: telephone, web-based or face-to-face advice and support for individual parents, informal ‘drop-in’ sessions; formal group-based parenting programmes; and the provision of general information such as written or audio-visual material. This work has its roots in a number of occupations such as the social professions, teaching,

clinical psychology, psychiatry and health visiting. Although these professions have a long history of working with parents, recognition that such work may have its own specific set of knowledge and skills has been more recent. Training and national policy frameworks supporting professionals working with parents are diverse across Europe. In France a national and transnational network for parents and those who work with parents has been established for many years. The UK is currently the only European country with national occupational standards (NOS) that define the skills levels and competencies required of practitioners working with parents. In Holland there is increasing recognition of parenting work as a specific branch and set of competencies within the social professions. The tradition of social pedagogy has been influential in the development of the social professions throughout many countries in Europe. Social pedagogy recognises a continuous need for individuals, communities and institutions to learn in order to promote their capacity to respond to and overcome social problems (Lorenz 2006). This approach aligns well with the aims of the project, as it was concerned with improving practitioners' capacity to empower parents to resolve their own difficulties.

Despite the different approaches to parenting work in the different countries, there is European-wide interest in developing standards and training for working with parents across Europe (Council of Europe, 2006). Parenting in the 21st Century was the first formal effort at establishing a sustainable transnational network for practitioners, policy makers and professionals in the parenting sector to exchange practice, expertise and competencies and to explore the possibility of European-wide occupational standards and qualifications mapping. It was therefore, however, also an ambitious project. European qualifications mapping for pharmacists, a regulated and well-established occupation in all member countries, was only accomplished after 16 years (Gordon, 1999).

The Need for a Transnational Perspective

Transnational exchange between practitioners working with parents is of increasing importance for a number of reasons. From a practical perspective, international cooperation and knowledge exchange facilitates the resolution of issues that are of an explicitly international nature, such as migration, cross-border adoption and child abduction (Payne, 2006). The context within which parents parent and parenting practitioners help parents to do so is increasingly global and requires a 'contextual understanding for a national perspective' (Payne, 2006: 170). Practitioners working with parents require local, national and international knowledge and practice skills to understand and work with the global dynamics underlying parents' situated needs.

Many of the issues parents face are not specific to national contexts. An analysis of work and care strategies of families in Finland, Italy, Portugal and the UK showed that the kind of support a particular family requires is less dependent on the nationality than on the educational level and work patterns of the parents (Larsen, 2004). Thus, two families of the same nationality but of different social backgrounds will show greater differences in terms of the services they need than two families with similar social backgrounds but of different nationalities. Given the convergence of national markets and the growth of the European service sector, it is likely that families in different countries will face similar issues and that the expertise of practitioners in one country will be valuable to practitioners working with the same target group in another country.

Opportunities to develop training and skills exchanges between practitioners across nation states could enhance confidence in working in these changing contexts. Labour is becoming increasingly flexible across the expanded EU. Making national qualifications for working with parents more transparent would also be of benefit to parenting practitioners wishing to work across different EU countries.

Development of the project

The project was initiated and led by a UK organisation that had championed the development of national occupational standards and training programmes for parenting practitioners. The project offered the opportunity to match fund costs for existing or new projects pursuing its aims. Existing contacts of the project lead were crucial in putting together the partnership. However, although key individuals from this organisation knew all of the partners, only some of the partners had worked with each other beforehand.

Projects participating came from: Poland, Romania, Slovakia, France, Belgium, Sweden, Holland, the UK including Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. Projects based in Spain and Germany were also invited to participate but in the end chose not to. The national contexts represented amongst the partners, therefore, spanned different welfare regimes across Europe that have been identified by Lorenz (1994). These include: the Scandinavian universalist model (Sweden); the residual model providing targeted intervention to those in need (UK); the corporatist model where social care provision is frequently delegated to voluntary and religious organisations (the Netherlands, France and Belgium); the rudimentary model where there are limited entitlements to state sponsored social benefits (Ireland) and social work within countries that were formerly communist (Poland, Slovakia and Romania). While these formulations can be criticised as being over simplistic and failing to take account of political and policy change this does suggest there are considerable differences in the national contexts of the participating organisations. All of the partners reported that parenting support work was being undertaken in their countries, though the scope and availability of this support and the resources dedicated to it varied greatly. The Council of Europe Family Policy Database (updated 2009) gives a good summary of different national strategies and provision for parenting support across Europe.

At the outset 18 organisations were involved; two were providing services to the network: the evaluation team, and the company building the website. Two partners withdrew shortly after the project began, which meant that, in all, 14 agencies contributed in some way to the project and the evaluation. Given that the impetus for the project had come from the UK it is perhaps unsurprising that the partnership had a strong UK bias: six out of the participating practice agencies were from the UK, though two of these were amongst those who subsequently withdrew. Partners undertook varied work. Some were primarily practice agencies working with parents and carers, offering counselling, group or telephone support and that additionally had an interest in the education and training of practitioners. Some had a co-ordinating role in the sector. Others had a specific brief to develop qualifications or deliver training and one was primarily research focussed. Some worked primarily at the local

level whereas others had more of a national or international focus. Hence, the partners were a heterogeneous group.

Partners were invited at the beginning of the project to identify their participation aims. All UK organisations were interested in implementing the recently established NOS, be it through establishing qualifications and vocational pathways or raising awareness among practitioners and the general public. Some shared an interest in exploring the possibility of European standards for the field. Specifically seeking to raise the international profile of parenting work, the Belgian and French organisations participated as representatives of the same international umbrella organisation. Whilst seeking to benefit from transnational knowledge exchange, most non-UK partners reported aims that were specific to their diverse national and regional contexts. A strong interest in developing their own NOS was voiced by the Dutch partner; partners from the Republic of Ireland were more concerned with improving regional practitioner training. The role of research in influencing social policy was of particular interest for the Swedish and Romanian partners. Raising awareness of the value of parenting practitioners amongst the general public and policy-makers on a national level were specific aims of the Polish and Slovakian partners.

Evaluation Design and Process

Located within the social work section of a UK university, we were contracted to carry out an external evaluation of the project. Our methodology and analytical strategy was based on the idea of illuminative evaluation. With its origins in social anthropology, illuminative evaluation focuses on the description and interpretation of innovations in their various contexts rather than the empirical measurement of pre-defined factors across contexts (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). It allows for sensitivity to contextual influences and therefore lent itself to the investigation of this particular project.

Evaluation questions were developed in collaboration with the project partners at an initial meeting. These involved: establishing whether information about training programmes, standards and principles of work with parents was exchanged; the value of the website and the e-groups; the effectiveness of the dissemination strategies and conferences and progress towards agreeing common principles and standards for work with parents. Partners were concerned that evaluation outcomes should be sensitive to the conditions and constraints of their own specific circumstances and roles and that they would not be expected, for example, to follow the UK direction of occupational standards if this were undesirable or unachievable in their own contexts; hence an additional evaluation question concerned how far partners had been able to achieve their own self-defined goals. The direction of the evaluation was also informed by the Leonardo programme priorities, namely: innovation, validity, dissemination, valorisation (i.e. multiplier effects through mainstreaming activity), transnationality and partnership.

To gain a global view of the project we adopted an open-ended approach, drawing data from a range of sources: three self-administered questionnaires distributed by e-mail; the project website; e-groups; project conferences and meetings; e-mail exchanges; partners' websites and leaflets; independent conference evaluations; face-to-face contacts with partners; a face-to-face interview with the project lead and our

personal experiences as evaluators of the project. The questionnaires enabled partners to establish specific objectives for their participation in the project, to report on progress at an interim and final stage and to provide feedback about their experiences of the project.

Data analysis and generation developed alongside each other. Regular meetings of the evaluation team gave opportunities to examine emerging findings and to address gaps in the data. The evaluators read the questionnaires independently and established emerging themes in subsequent group discussion. Throughout the project, researchers observed the project website and e-groups in terms of content and visitors' statistics. Researchers attended five of the eight conferences and both international meetings.

Much of our data were collected using electronic means, such as e-mail or the project website. Our choice of a predominantly e-based approach was partly influenced by the limited funds available to undertake the evaluation. At times this caused problems. It was difficult to access information that was only available outside the electronic or public sphere: for example face-to-face contacts, telephone conversations, and private e-mails between partners. Although partners initially welcomed our suggestion to copy us in on all their e-mail exchanges, this did not in fact happen. Despite partners' agreement to participate in the evaluation, questionnaire return was somewhat disappointing. Although all partners who continued to be involved in the project completed the initial questionnaire, nine completed the interim one and five the final. Data from some of those organisations who did not complete were, however, also collected during face-to-face meetings at conferences.

There could be a number of reasons for the sometimes limited response rate. As external evaluators we were by definition external to the project and may not routinely have been on partners' minds or a priority in their busy working lives. It may also be that some partners felt that they had already given us the necessary information and feedback and that the later questionnaires were repetitive. Recurring enquiries about our role suggested that some partners may have been wary of us. As one of the emerging findings was that some partners were less comfortable with the use of electronic forms of communication, this posed inherent problems in using this method. Language may also have been a limitation. Evaluation tools were in English (except the evaluation questionnaires, which were also in French). Many participants therefore had to provide information on their activities in a language other than their first language, which may have generated missing data, inaccuracies or misunderstandings. However, where possible we tried to double-check our understanding of the data provided with participants. Although simultaneous translation provided some insight into papers delivered at conferences, both evaluators and participants could only gain mediated experience of those materials that were delivered in a language other than their own.

In sum, strong reliance on electronic media and on the English language restricted us to data that were communicable by these means. Yet, these limitations also informed us of practical problems inherent in the processes of this project. Although these factors may have affected our insight into the project's processes on some occasions, overall the privileged access to data from different individuals and organisations gave us a unique overview of the project as a whole.

Findings

Exchange of information about principles, curricula and training for parents and the development of common standards, values and principles

In general partners reported that this had been a valuable part of the project, with exchanges of information around such topics as the development of occupational standards, university qualifications and approaches to influencing policy makers. The transnational element of the exchanges was reported as having been inspiring and partners reported that thinking of their work within a broader European framework had in some cases influenced organisational policy. Transnationality was also valued for opening up possibilities for new partnerships and projects, for example between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK Slovakia and the UK, and Romania, Belgium and France.

Although the international make-up of the project was valued, some partners expressed concern about the diversity of professional backgrounds and interests among project members. Some partners felt that the exchanges did not fully meet their needs for information particularly in relation to implementing occupational standards outside of the UK, research and evidence-based practice in parent education, transnational training schemes and best practice in foster care. Overall it appeared that partners' views about how far the project had fully achieved the aim of exchanging relevant information were dependent on the specialist areas of the partner organisations and whether these lent themselves to the formation of working alliances with other project partners.

Meeting individual aims and objectives

At the formative stage of the project, partners outlined individual aims and objectives. These were commensurate with the overall aims of the project, with the agreed evaluation questions and the Leonardo topics for evaluation. Partners who returned their interim questionnaire had agreed 52 steps to achieve these aims and objectives and by the interim stage partners reported that they had fully completed 20 of these steps and partially completed 23. A further nine steps had not yet been completed, six because they were not due to be completed until later and three could not be completed because of funding difficulties, organisational change or problems with using the project website. By the final stage (though only a third of these were returned) partners reported that not only had they completed the tasks they had set initially set themselves but in many cases the outcomes achieved had exceeded their initial expectations.

Dissemination to practitioners and policy makers

Eight international conferences were held under the auspices of the project and these were successful in recruiting significant numbers of participants and in attracting media attention. Partners reported that through these conferences partners they were able to disseminate the work that had been developed through the project and to articulate the importance of the parenting sector to professionals, policy makers and the wider public. Two organisations of nationwide scope emphasised the usefulness of the transnational aspect in informing and influencing social policy and adding leverage to negotiations with decision-makers.

'It is very useful to get input on what role parenting support have in other countries in general as well as in relation to policy and in relation to research/ evaluation....It impresses national policy makers to hear about a broader dimension'

'International examples can also be useful when discussing parenting support with decision makers.'

Numerous examples of ways in which the project had helped to catalyse change were cited. In the Netherlands, practitioners and policy makers planned a collaborative sector mapping exercise and modules about working with parents were developed for social work undergraduates. The Slovakian partner recruited 36 new trainees for their training programme, launched a transnational training scheme in cooperation with a Polish organisation and decided to hold regular events based on the conferences that had been delivered with the support of the project. Furthermore, through contributing to two nationwide media campaigns this organisation promoted public discussion about children in foster and institutional care. Irish and Polish partners were successful in organising regular conferences to disseminate their work. Irish partners reported that the project had enabled successful cross-border collaboration, which had been sustained beyond the original aims identified in the start of the project. The Romanian partner reported that that they had played a key role in the draft of the National Strategy on Parents Education. A UK partner described how the project had helped them lobby for the establishment of the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners and to create funding opportunities for practitioner development through the Parenting Fund.

Use of the project website and e-groups

During the lifetime of the project the website 'www.europarent.org' was established, which was generally available to the public, though postings and the e-groups were restricted to partners and were intended as an opportunity to exchange experiences of and approaches to developing the work of the project. There is some evidence that the website was useful to visitors. Unique visits to the website rose from 212 in June 2006 to 2163 in June 2007. However, the scope and amount of material posted on the website, though it grew modestly throughout the project, was somewhat limited. A small number of the partners were responsible for most of the postings. The e-groups remained largely inactive with no e-based discussions visible on the website and the e-group forum as a whole being used solely as a notice board with a few postings on topics such as practice standards, training, evaluation and research. There was one lively debate on the website regarding the value of 'credentialing the workforce'. Other sections were enriched by the publication of research findings and evaluations and policy material relating to national contexts. However, the website has not become a permanent resource, as was originally intended.

Progress towards agreeing common principles and standards for work with parents

At the initial meeting it was agreed that partners would decide at the interim stage how far agreeing common standards should be an objective of the project. At this point in the project partners were of the view that, given the different national contexts, common standards were not a realistic goal for the near future. Partners decided, however, that it was feasible to agree on common values and principles for

parenting practitioners. However, at the final stage little progress had been made towards this, though a number of partners were still voicing their conviction that this was a necessary and valuable next step. One partner expressed an interesting contrary view. This partner reported that participating in the project had affirmed their belief that focusing on values, standards and qualifications was useful only if research indicated that this was a valuable way to achieve good outcomes for parents and their children.

Discussion

Overall, it seemed that the project was successful in accomplishing some of its aims: particularly in raising the profile of parenting work regionally, nationally and internationally; in supporting partners to develop training programmes, qualifications and standards within and, to a lesser extent, across countries; and in some cases contributing towards the partners being able to secure substantial additional government funding to take the work forwards. It was, however, less effective in its aim of moving towards a shared agreement about values and principles underlying the work. There was also general disappointment in the limited use of the website and e-groups.

Successes

The transnational element was highly valued by most partners for generating new knowledge that was deemed relevant to the field of practice. Another partner pointed out the usefulness of transnational exchanges in bringing about a clearer picture of present and future tasks for the parenting professions.

‘We realised that there is a wide range of organisations working with parents from different family types, which raises questions about both the present and future direction of our Society.’

‘The network has enabled us to gain a European perspective which has informed our approach to our work.’

The project appeared to be effective in acting as a catalyst for activities that partners had already planned. On a practical level, by providing match funding, additional resources were made available to support this work. The expectation that partners would disseminate their work through the conferences provided a schedule to move this forward and motivation to have something to present. The project was also effective in fostering new affiliations between partners around specific interests. Examples are the UK drawing on Slovakian innovations in the field of foster care, Romania’s increasingly closer ties with the French partner’s international network.

Challenges

However, feedback from the partners reflected a discrepancy between these positive outcomes of the project and a general disappointment with the electronic means of communication that had been envisaged as a key vehicle for achieving these outcomes. Partners’ working practices and the feedback they gave in the questionnaires showed a clear preference of face-to-face actual meetings to virtual forms of networking.

“Direct meetings and seminars are more important in order to exchange information and keep contacts with partners.”

“We appreciate the knowledge and contacts gained during LEONARDO meetings and conferences.”

The formation of new collaborations and exchange of information between partners took place primarily in face-to-face meetings and at conferences. Most partners reported that these had been useful not only to their own work but also more generally to the development of standards and training. In contrast to this, the website and the e-groups were generally described as not so helpful or not helpful at all.

Although the website and e-groups had been envisaged as an important outcome in the original funding proposal, other forms of communication emerged as more central to the sustenance of this particular project. Partners criticised the *‘the limited use of the website’* and *‘the lack of communication via website’*. At the interim stage one partner expressed the wish that *‘the website can be complemented with at least some links to important texts (or institutions) from other countries than Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands.’*

The breadth of partners’ activities contrast with the slow development of the website and the failure of the e-groups. Information and communication technologies have become increasingly widespread and have been identified as successful and efficient tools for information exchange, knowledge generation, collaboration and networking across disciplinary and geographical borders (Porter, 2004; Russell et al., 2004). In this project, however, partners communicated primarily by seemingly more time-consuming and expensive means, such as conferences and international meetings, and made comparatively little use of the project’s online resources. Paradoxically, partners expressed profound dissatisfactions with both the website and the e-groups yet they apparently found it difficult to take the steps needed to make improve them. How can we understand the overall inactivity of members when it came to participating in and contributing to the virtual aspect of the project?

In attempting to understand this paradox, a number of technical, linguistic, temporal, psychological and social factors seem important. Technology is not simply a neutral means of enabling people to build and maintain actual relationships in the virtual world. Looking at previous interdisciplinary projects with a strong e-focus, it becomes evident that technology alone does not create a community (Courtright & Kling, 2003; Fusco & Schlager, 2003). Virtual communities created outside of existing professional communities have been unsuccessful in the sphere of teacher training (Fusco & Schlager, 2003) and born few fruits for professional development when designs were imposed from above that did not resonate with participants’ actual interpersonal relationships (Courtright & Kling, 2003).

General IT literacy and knowledge of the website’s specific processes were mentioned as key factors affecting partners’ usage of the tool. One partner felt there was a need for *‘better information on using website’* with the same partner reporting a *‘lack of understanding of how to access and disseminate information’*. One of the Eastern European partners pointed out that out that the relative cost of information technologies was higher in Eastern European countries and that access to and

familiarity with computers and the internet was therefore more limited. Since this was a transnational project and the majority of partners did not have English as their first language, it is also possible that the requirement of corresponding publicly and in writing with other professionals in a language other than one's own seemed off-putting. One partner thought that translated materials should be provided to widen access to non English-speaking staff.

Information overload in a professional environment may contribute to an avoidant stance towards new information (Morgan & Symon, 2002). Partners were frequently undertaking tasks related to the project in addition to their main occupations as civil servants, psychologists or social workers. A lack of time was mentioned by almost all partners as an obstacle to their active participation in the project, and the website in particular. Research findings suggest that the need for time may be even more pertinent in the consumption of virtual information (Nah, 2004). Online communication therefore inevitably tests its users' patience, and possibly even more so when there is confusion over how to use it effectively. Waiting time was increased by the difficulties partners experienced when trying to use the website, and in the long-term the slow rate of new uploads increased the wait for new materials. 'Communities fail when there is insufficient activity to make visiting the community interesting' (Preece et al., 2004: 215).

Psychological factors may also have been important. Preece et al (2004), in their study of so-called 'lurkers', that is people who log on but do not contribute, reported that factors such as 'only getting to know the group', 'feeling shy about contributing' and feeling that 'they had nothing to contribute' inhibited people's confidence to participate actively. These may also have been applicable to this project. The partners were a new group and the project necessitated a process of familiarising oneself with each other's work and the political, cultural and economic contexts within which different partners operated; this process meant that getting to know the group inevitably took some time. Shyness may have been heightened among those members of the project who would have had to make written contributions in a foreign language on a public platform. Some of the partners reported that they thought their work too specific, and of less relevance to other partners, or expressed feelings about their work being less important or successful than that of others.

It is difficult to ascertain whether partners who did not frequently contribute to the website were indeed "switched off" from using the website's content at all, or whether they were "networked" by the more active members and thus benefited from the materials they posted (Castells, 1996:244). A contributory factor to the generally negative feedback about the website could also have been that website visitors typically adopt the role of consumer rather than that of producer (Koiso-Kanttila 2004). This seems also to be true for some of the partners in this project. Though the website was ostensibly a collaborative venture, some partners may have looked to the project lead to take responsibility for the website production. Cook-Craig and Sabah's (2009) study of virtual communities of practice amongst social workers in Israel found that although social workers used, and frequently applied, knowledge gained from this source, they were much less likely to see themselves as knowledge producers or to actively initiate discussions about practice knowledge.

However, problems that were more intrinsic to the network and the project's aims might have also been fundamental to the difficulties encountered. The heterogeneity of the partnership has already been noted. Some partners reported that their own objectives seemed of limited fit with those of other partners and that a general interest in working with parents was not enough of a common denominator. Others reported a sense of isolation and lack of belonging to the endeavour. The scope of organisations and specialist areas involved were sometimes reported as being a hindrance, diverting focus away from the original aim of developing training, standards and qualifications. Nonetheless, partners who managed to foster collaborations around specific areas of interest benefited from the different specialisms represented by project partners.

Partners' comments illustrate a tension between the scope and specificity of the project, which could be both productive and isolating. While the diversity of perspectives and contexts were strengths, this may also have been an impediment to the active participation of all partners in creating a (primarily) virtual community of practice. Wenger (1998) writes about the dual processes of identification and negotiability in the formation of communities of practice. Identification refers to ways of supporting affinity and commitment and creating shared histories, whereas negotiability refers to processes such as inviting contributions, negotiating and enforcing shared standards and agreeing decision-making processes. Perhaps more work on developing these processes of identification was needed before an attempt was made to bring together groups of practitioners from such different agencies and settings in order to negotiate shared meanings and actions, particularly through a very public electronic medium. High levels of 'mutual dependence' have been identified as consolidating virtual communities (Fry (drawing on Whitley), 2006). The disparate nature of this network would have militated against this.

Practically, it would have been useful to have allowed more time for the partners to agree in detail the purpose and uses of the project website in order to create a stronger sense of mutual ownership. The self-perception of partners of being a consumer rather than a consumer-producer might have been challenged by enhancing the interactive features of the website. Task setting has been found effective in involving consumers in e-learning (Alant & Dada, 2005) and could have been adapted for this context, for instance providing a framework to encourage partners to post summaries of their interests and current work. Mentoring networks to introduce members to a website's mechanisms have been suggested as helpful forms of encouragement (Preece et al., 2004: 217).

Wenger (2001) outlines thirteen elements of successful communities of practice. He argues that communities need: to have a presence and visibility in members' lives and to have temporal rhythms and rituals; to encourage participation through ease and variety of interactions; to be of value to members in the short and long term; to provide a connection to the wider world; to enhance personal and communal identity; to create relationships and foster a sense of belonging while allowing different levels and types of participation; and to have leaders who take active responsibility for the community. Further attention to all of these factors might have enhanced the capacity of this group to develop themselves as a virtual community of practice.

Conclusion

The Parenting in Europe in the 21st Century project aimed to share knowledge of standards, training and qualifications for practitioners working with parents across Europe and to consider the scope for these to be harmonised. Partners in the project were drawn from nine European countries and represented different types and sizes of agencies. The project was successful in bringing together this diverse group of organisations and practitioners to share experiences of the roles of practitioners working with parents and their professional support needs, in supporting many of the partners to achieve their own individual goals in relation to the activities of the project, in building the profile of parenting work with policy makers and in fostering collaborations between individual partners for future work. Partners represented in the partnership hosted eight dissemination conferences.

Direct contact, face to face meetings and more traditional conference formats were preferred forms of communication, with the electronic forms of communication little used and valued. Although the website was developed during the project, partners felt that it had not been as effective as they would have liked and it has not been sustained. The e-groups did not develop as a means for the partners to develop dialogue about their practice as originally envisioned. Limited progress was made on agreement about specific standards and qualifications but the project offered an opportunity for some valuable debate about different approaches to improving standards of practice.

Some specific aspects of the social and professional relationships between the partners seemed to be significant in this preference for face-to-face rather than electronic communication. Although all of the partners had had some previous contact with the project lead prior to the start of the project not all of the partners knew each other or had worked together beforehand. The two meetings of all of the partners were highly valued, however this face-to-face contact may not have been sufficient to develop the kind of personal relationships that could have overcome factors that inhibited the use of electronic forms of communication.

More active consideration from the outset of the potential difficulties that such a disparate group of participants might face in using technological forms of community building would have been useful. The aims of the project were multiple and complex. The UK dominated in both the leadership and membership of the project. In retrospect, more modest aims concerned with sharing experiences, supporting partners' existing initiatives, fostering relationships between partners with similar interests and, if the website and electronic forms of communication were to be a key feature, more detailed attention to social as well as technological processes would have been valuable. It quickly became apparent that the objectives concerned with agreeing occupational standards and harmonising qualifications were not feasible. However, the initial emphasis on this may have been off-putting to some members and could have been perceived as an attempt by the UK to dominate the agenda. It is curious that little robust debate about shared principles underpinning parenting education and support took place. Gray and Fook (2004), in their discussion about the quest for a universal social work, discuss three key polarities: westernisation versus indigenisation; globalisation versus localisation; multi-cultural versus universal values. All of these were exemplified in some way in this ambitious and ultimately only partially successful project.

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