

EXPLORING ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY NETWORKS: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY PROJECT AS AN INNOVATIVE MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Based on the success of the Welcome to Kindergarten™ initiative, The Learning Partnership (TLP), a national advocacy organization for public education, initiated a pilot project called Family and Community Engagement Strategy (FACES), in the three Ontario communities of Cornwall, Durham and Sudbury. The overall goal of the FACES Project, funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, was to develop a coordinated community-based model and extend and enrich the Welcome to Kindergarten™, a program to help prepare children for school success. As part of the agreement, TLP was to provide evidence of progress made toward the objective of the grant: to increase and expand opportunities for all children to be ready for school. An evaluation component was included in the project to measure the results and impact on each community. The FACES Project is an example of a community network, as it involves a process of building partnerships among schools and agencies for the benefit of children and their families. A qualitative case-study design was used for the research. Themes that emanated from an analysis of the data across the three sites were: the nature of FACES as a community network, champions as leaders, establishing and sustaining FACES networks, challenging conditions, assessment of the impact, and innovative features of FACES networks.

BACKGROUND

The Welcome to Kindergarten™ program is a strategy that brings together parents/caregivers, children, and educators for orientation sessions at their local school to prepare children for their first day in the classroom (The Learning Partnership, 2017). Educators receive training and resources from *The Learning Partnership* (TLP) to host WTK sessions. In the year before the child starts school, parents/caregivers and children are invited to attend one or more WTK sessions. At these sessions, they are provided with a WTK bag that is full with early learning literacy and math resources that they can use at home to help prepare their child for school and learning (The Learning Partnership, 2017). During the WTK sessions, parents/caregivers and children have an opportunity use the resources and to meet the kindergarten educators, the principal, and community support agencies.

The FACES initiative was to foster more responsive and active relationships among community partners. As a development project, FACES involved the three communities and TLP in a process of knowledge creation (Bruce & Flynn, 2013; Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2010). Each of the three communities co-created a version of FACES, combining community and educational resources to form multi-agency, integrated services within their context to achieve goals and deliverables as identified in the funding agreement with the *Ontario Trillium Foundation*.

The Learning Partnership hired three coordinators to lead the FACES project in each respective community of Cornwall, Durham, and Sudbury. A steering committee was established

with members from various publicly funded and private organizations related to early learning at each of the three FACES sites. Although the dynamics and composition of each community were different, there were similarities in purpose and outcomes. Partners in the FACES projects included: project coordinators, steering committee co-chairs and members, school administrators, teachers, early childhood educators, representatives of various community agencies and parents of children registered in kindergarten.

A research team of five Nipissing University faculty members was successful in their application proposal to evaluate the impact of the FACES pilot project. The evaluation process collected data about the perceptions of coordinators, steering committees, community partners, principals, educators, and parents and became a source of ongoing information and feedback for TLP and each community. In the present article, the organic development of the FACES project across sites is described as a model of an educational community network, formed for a purpose, yet fostering creativity and innovation to reap benefits for present and future generations of families and children.

LITERATURE IN CONTEXT

The FACES Project is an example of a community network, as it involves a process of building partnerships among schools and agencies for the benefit of children and their families. Characteristics of successful partnership networks are continually reflected throughout the literature and certain elements appear to be necessary for establishing and sustaining multi-agency partnerships. Such characteristics include: networks of trust-based relationships; shared knowledge and experience; willingness to persist and work together on identified problems; and learning with and from a variety of partners. In these ways, multi-agency partnerships collaborate to structure and authentically share different responsibilities related to children's early learning.

Block (2009) describes networks and social fabric as being developed through a process of possibility-focused conversations involving members of the community to develop vision, purpose, and action. The literature reviewed in this article contextualizes FACES as an innovative network resulting from research to create policy and practice in the fields of early learning, school transitions and community partnerships. Three main themes emanate from the literature elucidating essential elements of networks: 1) the role of trust-based relationships and collaboration; 2) the role of shared leadership and vision in community partnerships and; 3) the ongoing resolution of challenges and opportunities. The literature review thus explores these elements and various approaches to building networks involving collaboration and shared leadership through school-community and multi-agency partnerships.

Trust-Based Relationships and Collaboration in Multi-Agency Networks

Community building happens at the rate of relational trust. An impressive body of research supports relational trust as a characteristic to successful change (Adams & Forsyth, 2013; Barkley, 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Ronnerman, 2016; Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, & Bristol, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Barkley (2008) explores the work of Bryk and Schneider (2003) identifying four key elements essential to building effective collaborative relationships and the successful development of multi-agency partnerships: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. Barkley supports the notion that collaborative community partnerships can benefit over time from sharing and considering self-assessment processes. Furthermore, Barkley references the work of Palmer (1998) who recommended members of networks actively listen to the

stories of fellow members to build trust as a foundation. Blankstein (2011) in his book, *The Answer is in the Room*, succinctly captures the significance of trust, “As trust is built, people are focused on working together to solve a problem they have collectively identified important. This, too, helps foster relationships and trust.” (p. 90)

The importance of creating trust-based, collaborative relationships among independent partners, along with developing common goals and undertaking collective action, were fundamental to the success of the three FACES projects. Bryk and Schneider (2003) describe relational trust, as “an interrelated set of mutual dependencies embedded within the social exchanges in any school community” (p. 41). The development of relational trust is regarded as a priority at all levels of any community partnership or project because it is such a fundamental basis for conversation that moves participants beyond their “silos” and into a space where multi-agency collaboration is not only possible but can thrive (Block, 2009). Relational trust has also been described as the, “connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance education and welfare of students” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 45) and this notion emerged consistently in data collected for the study of the FACES Project as an example of a community network.

Shared Leadership and Vision in Community Partnerships

Mangione and Speth, (1998) and Malsch, Green and Kothari, (2011) identified the fundamental elements as important to home and school community partnerships for supporting the transitions of young children to school: families as partners, shared leadership, comprehensive and responsive services, culture and home language, communication, knowledge and skill development, appropriate care and education, and evaluation of partnership success. These findings also underscore the importance of a shared vision held among all the practitioners working in home, school, and community partnerships. An emphasis, particularly in the UK, on “multi-agency partnerships” are increasingly seen as contributing to, and supporting the efficacy of, combined community and educational resources in the interests of early learning (Chemenais, 2009).

Similarly, in a synthesis of two studies with schools identified as inclusive, knowledge development sites researchers identified common themes related to creating optimal family-community-school partnerships: “invest in creating positive inviting, and inclusive school culture; provide strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; exhibit attributes of trusting partnerships (i.e., commitment, communication, collaboration, and respect); and provide opportunities for reciprocal partnership and involvement” (Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015, p. 237). The research shows that multi-agency partnerships will need skillfully designed tools to assist them in their work as they develop shared vision, common goals, and undertake collective action for a continuum of care (Yau, 2009).

Ongoing Challenges and Opportunities

Recurring themes in the related literature include the many and varied complex challenges for multi-agency partnerships. The nature of these challenges includes: personnel issues, time management, role clarification, parental attitudes, and communication between partners. It appears that parents and educators desire collaborative relationships (Christenson, 2003) but, with all the best intentions to work successfully together, creating and sustaining these relationships is not easily accomplished. Furthermore, while the addition of community partners to the network may offer support, this often contributes further complexity to the entity. As multi-agency partnership projects develop, participants need to see ongoing evidence that their efforts are resulting in progress toward the goals to which they are committed. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gorden (2009) report there

is little motivation for collective action toward agreed-upon goals unless participants believe their efforts will bring success. Further, Kaehne (2015) underscores the need for all partners to engage fully at the early stages of the partnership to ensure the partners have protocols in place to facilitate the changes that are required with the newly established partnerships.

Barclay and Boone (1995) describe partnering as a responsibility of all school personnel – across and beyond school roles. Of particular relevance to FACES are the many ways they suggest to build partnerships with those “hard-to-reach” families. Warnemuende (2008) highlights the critical importance of developing mutual trust and respect among children with disabilities, their parents, and the principal – as well as the need for accurate knowledge about the students at the school level. Christenson (2003) provides an intricate representation of potential structural and psychological barriers for families and educators in building family-school relationships. While status-oriented family issues (e.g., Social Economic Status, parental education, and number of adults in the home) are considered important, Christenson contends the psychological aspects of understanding complexities inherent in families’ situations must be given priority. Pushor (2007) describes the experience of working in a challenging neighborhood school where issues of transiency, student behavior, and the need for culturally reflective programming disrupted the school staff’s traditional perceptions of families and prompted the creation of an entirely new direction. The present study of the FACES Project, through the lens of trust based relations, shared leadership responsibilities/vision, and challenges and opportunities for building successful multi-agency partnerships provides a current example of a complex, yet sustainable community network, striving to meet the needs of today’s families in facilitating smooth transitions and successful entry to school.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case-study design was used for the research (Coles, 1993; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The approach was ethnographic, developing a picture of an emerging culture in each case and across cases over two years. Each of the three communities, Cornwall, Durham, and Sudbury, were explored both individually and collectively. The number of participants varied among communities and between data collection cycles. Research participants in each of the three communities included project coordinators, steering committee co-chairs and members, community agency representatives, principals, vice principals, teachers, early childhood educators, and parents who were involved in FACES activities.

The research questions pertaining to the present study were:

- What are the defining features of the FACES network?
- What is the perceived impact of the FACES network on stakeholders?
- What are the challenging, innovative and sustainable features of the FACES Project as a model of community network?
- How can the knowledge and experience gained from the three community networks be mobilized to inform policy and practice?

Data were collected and analyzed in two annual cycles by the research team. Informal feedback and preliminary findings were provided to the communities after each cycle. Two sources of data were utilized: 1) documentation and resources provided by *The Learning Partnership* and each of the three communities and 2) participants’ perceptions through individual (Seidman, 2006, 2013; Kvale, 1996) and focus group interviews (Seidman, 2006, 2013). The interviews followed a semi-structured approach (Jones, 1985; Fontana & Frey, 2000), with a set of guiding questions differing slightly for each group. There were a total of 93 individual and group interview sessions,

each approximately 45-60 minutes in length, conducted by members of the research team. Across the three communities, 61 focus groups were held with three to six participants in each group in addition to the 32 individual interviews. At the conclusion of each individual and focus group interview, participants were invited to contact the researchers by telephone or e-mail with further comments. All individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Since the FACES evaluation was exploratory and inductive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and in accordance with the concept of emerging design (Glaser, 1992), the methods and questions used in the evaluation varied and evolved due to differences in the three communities and because development of the FACES projects was ongoing. Methods of data analysis included the three streams of activity identified by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction (review data, develop codes, code data to summarize, sort, and organize); data display (organize and compress data into matrix); and conclusion drawing/verification (make meaning of the data by noting patterns, interpretations, triangulation of sources). Using interview transcripts and documentation from the various sites and sources, constant comparative analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Handsfield, 2006) was conducted to derive categories and themes in the data. Subsequently, conclusions were drawn from results in various data displays, and verification involved triangulation of data from the multiple sources across all three sites.

FINDINGS AND RESULTING THEMES

The data collected included discussions with TLP, artifacts, and documents provided by each site, and volumes of transcriptions resulting from the numerous focus groups and interviews conducted with various participants across the three sites. The five faculty members reviewed the data, developed summaries, organized the data and drew conclusions both within and across sites. Each community was examined as a separate case study, with across case comparisons also made in the analysis process. The results are presented and discussed in relation to each of the four research questions and resulting themes.

Research Question 1: Defining Features of FACES

The nature of the FACES project as a community network.

Each of the three communities of Sudbury, Durham, and Cornwall approached the implementation of FACES differently, yet there were similar features across sites. All three communities had a project coordinator contracted by TLP and a corresponding steering committee comprised of community stakeholders. The project coordinator of each site had similar, yet varying backgrounds and each steering committee also had slightly different compositions.

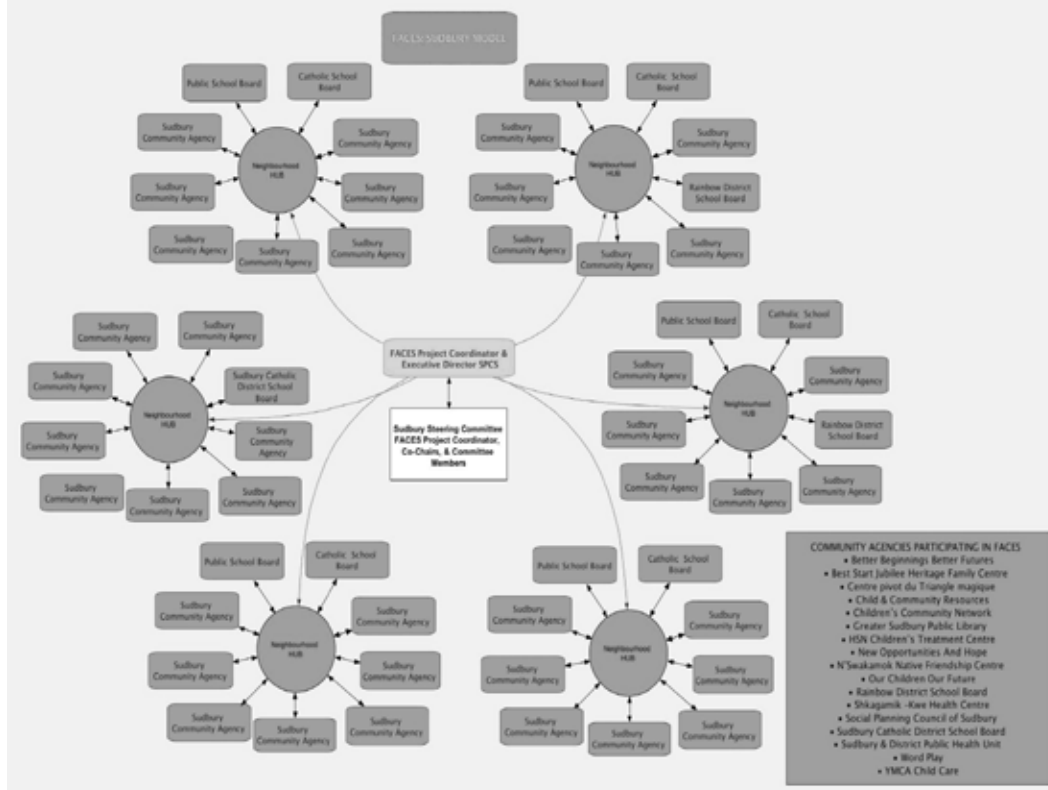
The city of Sudbury is regionally organized into several neighborhoods and this structure was used to frame the FACES Project. The executive director of the Social Planning Council was contracted as project coordinator and took a leading role in shaping the FACES project. The coordinator was supported by a steering committee comprised of representatives of the partnering community agencies including the English public and Catholic district school boards. The committee's two co-chairs were representative of the public board and the Sudbury and District Public Health. With an emphasis on collaborative problem solving, steering committee members worked with agencies in six hubs, each of which included a number of schools. The purposes and planned organization of FACES in Sudbury was quite different to the more school-based localized sessions organized in the other two communities. Sessions in Sudbury resembled community-wide orientation and training sessions compared to the local WTK/FACES sessions in Durham and

Cornwall that included parents and children. The FACES sessions held in Sudbury were organized to include representatives from numerous agencies of each neighborhood, working in partnership with school personnel (e.g., principals and teachers).

In Durham Region, the FACES project was a partnership between the Durham District School Board and various community agencies. There were 28 schools representing the northern and southern regions piloting the FACES initiative. The Durham District School Board and community agencies had historically been involved in a number of related initiatives and programs. The partnership between the school board and the early childhood education partners were well established in the region prior to the introduction of the FACES project. The organizational structure of FACES in Durham was very complex as the centre of the project was a steering committee, representative of the Durham District School Board and community services personnel. The FACES coordinator in Durham was a retired school principal with a long history as a member of a number of early learning/ childcare initiatives in Durham. The steering committee co-chairs together represented both the school board and community agency perspectives. The rest of the steering committee consisted of highly engaged and diverse group of individuals representing staff from both the school board and community agencies with a purposeful mandate to integrate the school board and community representatives. The steering committee, supported by the FACES coordinator, provided balanced and informed direction and guidance for the implementation of FACES activities in schools and in the community at large.

The Cornwall FACES Project was similar to Durham, yet represented both the local Catholic and Public School Boards and community agencies on the steering committee. The project coordinator was an active and well-respected community leader with experience in the early childhood field. Cornwall, like Durham, held school based FACES sessions for parents and children at thirteen different schools. In all three sites, the nature of the FACES project entailed community partnerships for a common purpose, organically developed, to meet the needs of young children and their families. Figures 1, 2 and 3 provide graphic depictions of the complexity of each network with interesting features such as committees, subcommittees, and hubs working together.

Figure 1: The Structure and Organization of the FACES Project Network in Sudbury



Champions as leaders of FACES networks.

Although the FACES initiative brought the community partners together, the network representatives at each site struggled with a process to achieve the FACES goals and required leaders with a vision to operationalize their goals. In each community terms of reference were created by the project coordinator and steering committee outlining the committee's mandate, reporting structure, membership, decision-making process, and objectives. These were periodically reviewed during the project to ensure that the steering committee was staying on task. One co-chair commented,

One of the foundations that we spent a lot of time on right at the beginning was our terms of reference and narrowing down the wording to make sure, as much as possible, that it reflected the philosophies of each group [community agency] represented.

There was a clear focus in all three communities on responding to the needs of families with concerns raised around finding innovative ways to enable all families to engage with services and programs enhancing the present WTK initiative in their community. In Sudbury, the project coordinator and steering committee members consistently reflected the emphasis on attracting families who did not attend the planned events, and removing the barriers preventing those families from participating. The FACES project coordinator and steering committee identified a shared goal and were propelled into action to pursue strong community partnerships with marginalized families

and not on getting the families that were already engaged in doing more; rather, their goal was to reach those families who were not attending activities offered at the community Hubs.

In Durham region, the FACES coordinator and steering committee co-chairs were the visible champions of the initiative. The co-chairs, representing the education and community sectors, put much effort into building a solid foundation that would create a cohesive, open, and reflective atmosphere. Committee meetings were organized in a round robin, circular formation with members intermixed to enhance the integration of ideas and representatives from the schools and the community. New sub-committees were formed including the Training/Orientation Sub-Committee and the Best Practice Resource Sub-Committee; each of these sub-committees had specific responsibilities for ensuring the successful implementation of FACES.

In Cornwall, the leadership of the FACES project was more centralized on a school board perspective since the two co-chairs were representatives from the Catholic and Public School Board. The steering committee included seven members from the school boards, again stressing the important role of educators for the FACES project. At an initial orientation session, one participant explained the project, “a really true, beginning collaboration; having the teachers and the community agencies talking and planning together, a really great first step.” The project coordinator was a respected long-time member of the community who had no previous employment experience with the community partners. The steering committee focus was to support the development and implementation of FACES sessions with commitment from the community agencies and school boards. This was accomplished to a large extent through the process of dialogue, decision-making, and collective action involved in committee work – work that enhanced interpersonal relationships among school board and agency personnel, first within the steering committee and then the localities. One member explained, “The decision-making process takes a bit more time. But at the same time, . . .without universal buy-in to the ongoing decision-making, the danger is that agencies will begin to fall away.”

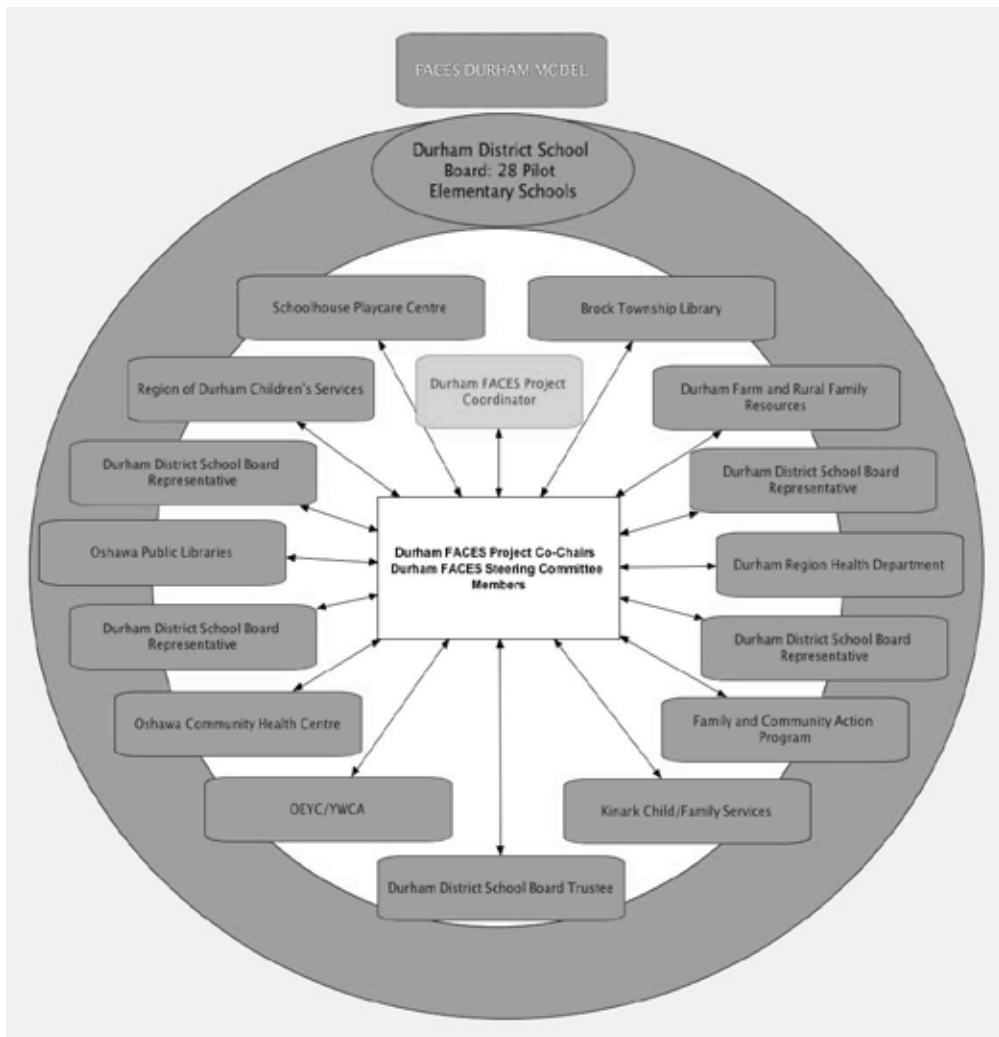
At all three sites, the leadership provided by the FACES coordinators and steering committee members, were pivotal to the success of the project. The community networks, formed at each site were characterized as distributive leadership, focused on shared decision-making, and consensus-building for collective action. Even though some FACES sites were more community-based rather than school board-based, all were focused on reaching out to families for the betterment of young children.

Innovative and sustainable features of the FACES networks.

All three sites were innovative in their approach to the implementation of the FACES Project goals. *The Learning Partnership* provided some guidance, but allowed each site to meet its unique needs with their own creative problem-solving endeavors. The sites strived to develop networks, which included features ensuring the longevity and sustainability of the initiative.

The Sudbury network was innovative in their approach to achieve FACES goals in that the steering committee, under the leadership of the chair, used FACES as the stimulus to further their shared concerns of working with marginalized families. The structure of FACES was innovative – the schools were considered as community partners, not the center of the network. Central to the FACES network was the dual role for the Executive Director of the Social Planning Council, who was also FACES project coordinator, and turned out to be particularly beneficial in promoting a community partnerships approach to FACES/WTK in Sudbury. The organization of local neighborhood hubs further enabled FACES in Sudbury to be tailored to meet both local community needs and the goals for FACES identified by TLP.

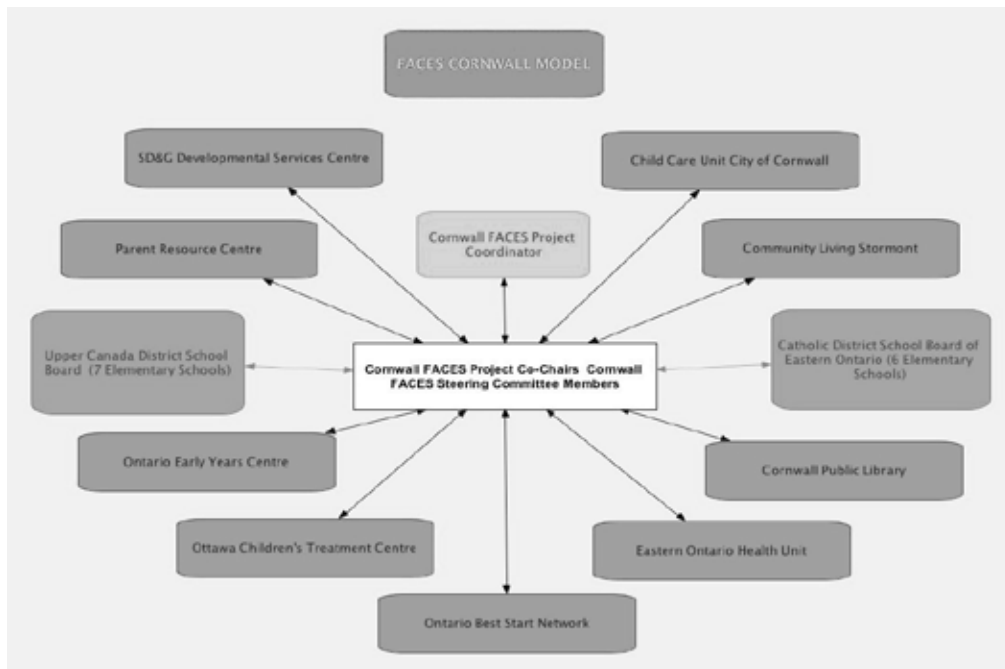
Figure 2: The Structure and Organization of the FACES Project Network in Durham



The innovative features of the Durham and Cornwall FACES initiative, and the sessions offered for parents and young children, were mostly evident through the collaboration of school board and community service agencies. The purposeful and collegial efforts of the FACES coordinator, steering committee members and the pilot schools were innovative in that this type of collaboration had not yet been attempted in previous strategies to ease school transitions. Another innovative strategy in Durham was to use a range of approaches to engage parents including phone invitations, staggered sessions with resources, community-based sessions at sites such as libraries, and ongoing cycles of review and reflection. The main innovation developed by the Cornwall group was the Family Fun Kit concept to entice and support parents in their efforts to prepare children for school entry. These kits were creative and practical applications of the FACES goals promoting

engagement and learning in families across the schools' catchment area. Overall, the three sites were innovative in interpreting the goals of the FACES initiative and meeting the needs of each distinct community. Each FACES steering committee developed unique terms of reference and used strategies appropriate for their stakeholder groups.

Figure 3: The Structure and Organization of the FACES Project Network in Cornwall



Research Question 2: Perceived Impact of FACES

Assessing the impact of the FACES networks.

The effectiveness and impact of the FACES initiatives in each community were assessed through the self-reporting by participants who included educators, community partners, and parents and the attendance and evaluations of FACES sessions, which provided feedback on the intended outcomes. Overall, there was a strong sense that the FACES project activities were effective in creating new partnerships, engaging parents, and increasing awareness of strategies to facilitate school transitions.

Factors for evaluating Sudbury's network include the effective collaboration among community partners, increased opportunities for professional learning, inclusion of community partners not previously engaged, and an increase in the number of targeted participants at planned events. Further, the Sudbury network used assessment criteria to identify variables and appropriate criteria for measuring the impact of their work in the community. For example, the steering committee collected feedback after each session to inform the committee's next steps. Feedback gathered from participants during the *Marginalized Families* workshop in Sudbury, further informed the steering committee's decision to host the *Getting Everybody In* workshop. Community partners

who attended this one-day event participated in activities clearly focused on further developing their cultural sensitivity to marginalized families' issues. Participants reported heightened awareness of the cultural, societal, and service provider barriers imposed on the marginalized population, and they also shared experiences of exclusion, early school experiences, and racism. As reflected in workshop evaluations, the participants believed the session was a positive experience and fulfilled the goal of the session, "to become more effective supporters of parents and families of all backgrounds."

Data collected in five Durham region schools indicated FACES had a significant positive impact for all groups of participants. Parents were mostly enthusiastic about the sessions. One parent exclaimed, "My daughter absolutely loved it." Parents noticed the children were encouraged to try out new activities at the sessions and they repeated these activities at home. One parent stated, "It encouraged them to want to do some of these things and practice them at home." However, some parents reported that their children were a little overwhelmed if a WTK/FACES session included too many people and activities. A few were concerned that the FACES sessions may not provide an accurate picture of how a real classroom would operate in September. In relation to community agencies, parents were thankful that they had the opportunity to meet community agency representatives and educators.

In the second year, parents noted a variety of FACES sessions that focused directly on curriculum areas. Some wondered if such sessions might be provided earlier in the school year. Others felt strongly that sessions should focus directly on the learning expectations of the kindergarten program. Generally, parents felt that the opportunity to attend consecutive sessions (rather than a single WTK session) with involvement by educators and community agency representatives assisted their children to transition more smoothly to school. A strong factor contributing to the perceived success of the WTK/FACES sessions by parents was the opportunity to meet the future teacher and to become more aware of classroom routines. Teachers said that the hands-on activities were beneficial for parents. As reflected in the words of a teacher, "It was very good for parents to see that learning to read and write doesn't mean a paper and pencil." Through FACES, community agency representatives strongly reported becoming more familiar with school personnel, financing, and operations. One said, "First there was reluctance from front-line workers but, after the sessions were completed, they really enjoyed the experience."

In Cornwall, the impact of FACES was evident across all sectors, originating from the commitment of the steering committee members. Steering committee members reported, "support for FACES within the steering committee, the participating school boards and the community agencies is solidly in place" and that a strong commitment existed to "move the project forward." As one steering committee member declared, "We're all volunteering our time so I think we're pretty committed to why we're here. And when we're here, we're pretty committed to getting the things done we need to get done." Another major accomplishment in Cornwall was the development, production and distribution of five different Family Fun Kits to give to parents during the FACES sessions. Parents said that their children appreciated the learning resources they received during local FACES sessions. One said, "Yes, they got a little bag of stuff and they were very proud of the little bag they got to bring home. They were very excited." Another said, "She showed her big sister all the things she got." Many community partners spoke passionately about the trusting, professional relationships that had developed or enhanced during the FACES project among the community agency representatives and school staff. One participant explained, "No other hands-on project but FACES has ever built such a bridge between the schools and the agencies in our community." Generally, the parents, administrators, teachers/educators and community partners across the three sites were very positive about the impact of the FACES project and sessions and

spoke highly of the value of the FACES activities in promoting school readiness, collaboration and shared responsibility for successful school transitions for young children and families.

Research Question 3: Challenging, Innovative, and Sustainable Features of FACES as a Model of Community Network

Challenges of establishing and sustaining FACES networks.

The task of establishing and creating the FACES Project in each community was monumental given the other priorities and responsibilities of the members of each stakeholder group. In addition, there were many other similar early childhood initiatives already underway in the communities of each site, therefore it was challenging to introduce the new FACES project as yet another early learning activity. For example, in Sudbury projects were already underway to engage families in early learning at the Hubs included an eight-week *School Readiness Program* and *Bags for Babies*. Under the leadership of the project coordinator, it was determined that the work of the Sudbury FACES steering committee should be to focus on engaging marginalized families. The steering committee developed The *Family Engagement Framework*, which outlined their vision and guiding principles. The vision was presented as follows:

Working at the neighborhood level, Sudbury FACES will create plans that encourage all families to make early and important connections to the educational community. The vehicles to this vision include WTK in the schools and all the supportive opportunities provided by the Best Start Hubs and the wide variety of connected community partners.

The Sudbury steering committee used this framework to organize an event attended by over 100 community representatives titled: *Getting Everybody In: Create Local, Neighborhood Based Plans for Inclusion Results for Community Partners*. The purpose of the planning workshop was to bring together community agencies in neighborhood specific engagement strategies. Using existing locations of the *Best Start Hubs*, participants in the session were organized into six neighborhood groups/hubs. Each group was issued the challenge of creating a plan to meet the FACES vision that would also have relevance for their local neighborhood Hub. The neighborhood groups identified policy implications or issues that might support or prevent engaging marginalized families. After identifying the issues in their respective neighborhoods, the groups gathered information to create a plan, and generated lists of specific actions to carry out their plans. The Sudbury FACES coordinator and steering committee maintained their momentum to reach out to marginalized families with a focused collegial approach.

The implementation of the FACES project in Durham was a prime concern of all involved. In year one of the FACES project, the project coordinator and co-chairs worked collaboratively with the steering committee members and partner schools and agencies to host two orientation sessions for representatives intended to explain the focus and intended outcomes of the FACES initiative. The use of cooperative planning time and templates for the school-based sessions was critical to the successful implementation of the family engagement activities. There were at least two sessions planned for parents and their children in each of the 28 participating schools. Sessions addressed such topics as literacy, numeracy, healthy eating, and school transitions. These sessions were usually co-planned and co-delivered by teachers, educators, and community partners. Attendance was good for the first session but waned in session two across most schools. In the second year of implementation, the steering committee started to create a sustainability plan for FACES, which described structural considerations such as organization, program resources and training, funding, program support, and evaluation, and reporting methods.

Further, the Durham project coordinator and the co-chairs developed a draft overview of potential FACES success indicators. The steering committee reviewed the draft recommendations and provided feedback that was used to redraft the indicators of success for future use. An example of a change in approach from year one to year two - the FACES orientation/training day was revised and the sessions were held in smaller, more geographically-diverse locations. Using two locations allowed for smaller groupings of people to interact and reduced the driving time for participants, thereby increasing attendance. It was noted that school teams and community agency partners were more comfortable with each other in year two, which contributed to a more concise and streamlined session that conveyed specific information and direction on the components, expectations, and resources of the FACES program. Schools also continued to tailor their local FACES sessions to best meet the needs of their communities. This local autonomy was deemed important to the success of the program. Sustainability was also ensured by attention to ongoing surveys, feedback loops and also to presentations made by the FACES Evaluation Team.

In Cornwall, the establishment of the FACES project was enthusiastically undertaken by the project coordinator and steering committee members. The first meeting was held at the school board office and was well attended by community stakeholders who hosted carousel information booths for greater awareness of all members including the school board personnel. The priorities of the steering committee in year one were to build commitment for FACES among the community agencies and school boards and to get the local FACES meetings started as quickly as possible (a minimum of two FACES sessions annually per participating school).

Priorities emphasized in the second year were to develop ways to extend and strengthen parent engagement in addition to FACES meetings and develop plans to sustain FACES once funding from TLP ended and the project coordinator was no longer in place. The Cornwall FACES coordinator and steering committee worked diligently to meet at least once a month in the first year. They reviewed community data related to young children and families and based on their understanding of community needs, developed terms of reference and a work plan. In Cornwall, two FACES sessions were offered at each school on a number of early learning-related topics. These sessions were collaboratively planned and presented by school and community representatives. This collaborative planning was considered a strong point of the project and a reason for success.

The establishment and sustainability of the FACES projects at the three sites were based on a strong foundation of involvement in early learning initiatives, a solid understanding of the collaborative process, and continual cycles of review and reflection. The role of *The Learning Partnership* was significant in facilitating meetings of the three site coordinators, with input from the FACES Evaluation Team, which supported the sustainability of the projects at each location. Regular reporting structures, agendas, minutes of meetings, and interim reports all contributed to the shared information and provided momentum to the project sites.

Challenging conditions and innovative features of the FACES networks.

The FACES networks in each community had both positive enabling features and ongoing challenging conditions. The enablers at each site included strong local leadership and a collaborative a focus on families' needs with a tolerance for ambiguity. The challenges common across sites were reported as the need for greater time, resources, and clarity.

Steering-committee members experienced various levels of overwhelm when trying to balance all the competing demands on their time – both as professionals and members of the steering committee – and a recurring sense of discouragement, at times, that no matter how hard they tried it was often just not possible to reach the most needy families. Complex challenges encountered

in *balancing* time commitments were shared – for example, attempts to effectively balance their full-time responsibilities (as employees) and their voluntary contributions as part of their role in the community partnerships aspect of the steering committee, which were often seen as equally relevant to the interactions with families during their full-time jobs. There was also frustration around the frequent turnover of staff within local agencies and the inevitable impact this had on stability in terms of consistency and support for new initiatives. As one steering committee member emphasized, “It requires us continually to repeat and adapt training and double back to re-develop common understandings and agreement.”

Another challenge noted by interviewed participants was the need for more resources. In the words of one participant, “It’s easy to say, ‘Well, we could do this and we could do that.’ Of course we could, but there is a need to operate within the resources that are available.” Embedding FACES within the normal operation of the partner organizations was an innovation deemed to increase the longer-term ability of FACES to compete for resources with other projects in the schools and community. One participant asserted:

Right now FACES is new and bright and shiny. The first years of a project are usually like that. But in the future, we’re going to need to sustain engagement and you have to fit well into the big puzzle of what the community is interested in and focused upon.

As a further challenge, the need for clarity was experienced in the development of the vision of the project for each community. For example, in Sudbury, the steering committee evolved with a clear focus on engaging marginalized families and creative solutions were developed to address ongoing challenges and to nurture sustained action. This work was further informed and enhanced by the local neighborhood hubs, as led by representatives of the Best Start Network. The process of achieving the success was not immediate, as reflected by a steering-committee member, “We had to try to figure out what being part of this committee meant. It’s been kind of a muddy road but once we figured out where we were going things got a lot clearer.” In all three communities, the processes of talking, sharing, and informing the conversation from different perspectives around the table and an openness to innovation moved the committee toward consensus and a clear sense of direction.

Another challenge related to clarity, discussed extensively, was the meaning of the word engagement. It became important for educators and community agency staff to continue to learn about why parents are engaged or not engaged. One FACES participant put it this way, “All parents want the best for their children. We need to know about what is blocking parents individually and systemically from active engagement in their children’s learning. We need to remove those blocks and substitute effective support.” Related to the need for clarity, was the overall perception held by many participants that the term FACES was not well understood by parents and partners. Many schools continued to use the term *Welcome to Kindergarten*TM in reference to the FACES sessions and instead often utilized WTK/FACES sessions for general communications. The need to clarify the concept and language related to the initiative was pervasive in the participant interviews and focus groups.

Research Question 4: Knowledge and Experience Gained from the Three Community Networks

Lessons learned: Networks as catalysts for change and innovation.

Across the three pilot project sites for FACES, it is evident that the networks created have

been catalysts for change and innovation in the field of early childhood and school transitions. FACES in Sudbury has continued to mobilize community partnerships, guided by the project coordinator and steering committee and build on the energy and enthusiasm with an emphasis on a project seen as highly relevant to the community (i.e., the increased engagement of marginalized families).

The FACES Network in Durham has been an energetic undertaking involving centralized guidance and localized implementation to meet the needs of young children and their families. The changes which emanated from this network are a greater sense of collaboration among school and community partners, an increased awareness of effective strategies to engage families and the development of planning templates and accompanying resources in a binder/handbook collating all the Best Practice materials related to FACES initiatives for common sharing and understanding.

In Cornwall, many changes were noted by participants due to the FACES project such as a significant positive impact on building closer relationships among educators and the community agencies. One participant affirmed,

When we had that day at our school board and all of the Public and Catholic Kindergarten teachers were there and most of our principals. It was the first time I remember when the two boards got together on a project like that in one room. It was really neat – ground breaking. Educators reported that greater mutual understanding and appreciation has developed between educators and the community agencies. As one person put it, “Teachers are more relaxed with their community partners. Sometimes community partners just drop in during the day. This is real progress.” Another change was the opportunity to review Early Development Inventory Data (EDI). One educator said, “Last year was probably the first time that most kindergarten teachers in our board anyway, really were able to sit down and see the results.”

In summary, many changes occurred due to the FACES project and the formation of community networks. Most notably, service agency staff and school staff became better acquainted and worked together to engage families in their children’s learning. The teachers from across schools and local boards met, sometimes for the first time with their counterparts to review early learning data and to plan community initiatives. The stakeholders in early childhood learned more about each other’s roles and collaboratively reached out to families, utilizing a unified approach. Children entering school were invited with their families to repeated sessions offered by community partners and teachers. This was an innovative change to the traditional one-time orientation session previously offered by some schools. The FACES networks will hopefully be sustained over time with increased resources and support in the form of release time for personnel from all the community agencies, including schools to engage and collaborate, physical space to host orientation sessions and meetings to coordinate events, and early years literacy and math materials for parents to use outside the classroom to support children’s transition to the classroom. An innovative mindset and sustained resources were deemed to be important for future success.

Networks informing future policy and practice.

The final research question of “How can the knowledge and experience gained from the three communities be mobilized to inform policy and practice?” can be answered with a set of recommendations for policy changes derived from the findings of the present study. Knowledge mobilization strategies are essential to capitalize on and share new understandings gained from these three initial FACES projects. As Johnston and Kirschner (1996) found, studying individual examples of community partnerships is a means of identifying more general principles governing success. The evaluation of the FACES projects has demonstrated that promoting increased parent

engagement in children's early learning is a complex project that will require sustained efforts and resources over a number of years. Three key understandings resulted from the development of the FACES networks:

1. Members of a multi-agency network need to begin by focusing on the development of a shared vision, terms of reference, a collaborative inquiry stance, and a consensus-based decision-making process. Clear project parameters and defined success criteria are critical to collaborative work in multi-agency partnerships.
2. Responsive and respected local leadership is necessary to empower knowledgeable, well organized, and enthusiastic committee members in representing and operationalizing the mandate of the network.
3. A network to promote increased parent and community engagement is challenging and complex. Stakeholders are encouraged to use innovative approaches to foster understandings for community building in diverse communities. Joint responsibility for healthy child development will facilitate school success.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As Block (2009) described, networks are developed through a process of possibility-focused conversations involving members of the community to develop vision, purpose, and action. The FACES initiative, across three pilot project sites, was successful in creating innovative and impactful networks, which resulted in changes to the perceptions and interactions of stakeholders in early education. These FACES communities provided evidence of the efficacy of combining community and educational resources in the interest of early learning (Cheminais, 2009; Datnow, Hubbard, Mehan, 2002). The results of this study align with previous research on the power and potential of multi-agency partnerships to support early learning and transitions to school (Barclay & Boone, 1995; Christenson, 2003; Datnow et al., 2002; Glickman, et al., 2009; Yau, 2009).

The similarities and differences among the three communities were significant in their interpretations of the FACES expectations and timelines. Nevertheless, across all the communities a key accomplishment was the development of relational trust among representatives of various agencies and extending increased trust into the broader community. The development of relational trust within the steering committees supports conclusions from the literature that relational trust is critical to the development of community partnerships (Adams & Forsyth, 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Ronnerman, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Bryk and Schneider (2002) purported relational trust is the glue that allows stakeholders to work together to enhance education and the welfare of students. The development of strong local leadership for FACES projects was undertaken at each site. The leadership took different forms in each site, depending on the community's perceived needs, but the project coordinator's role was critical to the success of the projects in all three sites. Each of the coordinators exemplified the qualities of a visionary leader with varying knowledge, skills, and experience relevant to the community context. Consistent with the literature (Haines, et al., 2015; Glickman et al., 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2014), in all three sites, there was a process in place that enabled the development of a shared vision among participants. Cheminai (2009) showed that multi-agency partnerships need skillfully designed tools to assist in their work as they developed shared vision, common goals and undertake collective action for a continuum of care (Glickman et al., 2009).

The specific results from this research cannot be generalized to other community groups or specific sites. The results are specific to the purposes of the research, diversity of participants, their

social contexts, and three communities (Taylor & Bogden, 1984). Nevertheless, it is possible that patterns and themes that emerged in the analysis of the data regarding the multi-agency partnerships in the three communities may be applicable to other settings. The results indicate strongly that focused and shared leadership, flexibility, and trust were critical to the success of the project. The FACES initiative had emerged from research evidence supporting the value of family engagement in early learning (Pushor, 2007). The implementation of varied strategies, meeting the unique needs of each community resulted in greater involvement of families in transitions to school. These positive results provide unquestionable confirmation of the need to institutionalize the features of the FACES project, and network components as described, into the fabric of current society. Future policy and practices will hopefully provide financial and human resources to communities for collaborative efforts to engage families in their children's learning, at all levels of schooling from entry to graduation. With attention to the new key understandings, policy makers and practitioners will ensure successful transitions and experiences in school for all learners.

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