

## **Building Research Capacity and Community Engagement: Five Action Research Projects from the PEI Children’s Secretariat**

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### Introduction

The Research in Early Child Development (RECD) Initiative was formed in October 2008 to develop a working framework for early child development in Prince Edward Island (PEI). The project also focused on facilitating indicator development, data collection, and reporting for early childhood development within the twelve networks of the [PEI Children's Secretariat \(PEI CS\)](#). The RECD has a long-term goal to build capacity for expertise, resource support, and research in early child development for the government of Prince Edward Island and the PEI CS.

During the fall and winter of 2008-2009, the RECD team interviewed every member of the twelve networks of the PEI Children's Secretariat. Data analysis was completed based on a series of questions on the programs, services, and data collection strategies developed and used by the networks. In addressing a key question, *How can the RECD team help you to include more research in your program?*, many PEI CS members indicated their desire to integrate research within their own practice. They requested help in developing tools to determine where gaps existed in their work with the families and children of PEI. Finally, members of the PEI CS also confirmed their interest in developing effective tools to evaluate programs and services.

Several action research workshops were developed in March and April of 2009 to introduce network members to strategies for researching their own work. The first workshop focused on helping networks choose and refine a research question. Network members were then encouraged, over the course of a week, to discuss an issue they wanted to explore with their members. These discussions provided a focus for considering the needs of the organizations and members, and provided a starting point for the second workshop. The second workshop focused on collectively refining the research questions and outlining the research proposal. RECD researchers requested that participants submit a finalized research proposal by May 1, 2009.

Five networks developed a research proposal using a set of guidelines developed in the workshops:

- The Child Injury Prevention Network
- The Early Childhood Education and Care Network
- The Exceptional Needs Network
- The Family Literacy Network
- The Parent Support Network

The RECD team worked closely with these five networks to help develop their proposals as well as a strategy for project implementation.

### Rationale

According to the RECD literature review (2008), a clear need exists to include research in a variety of areas related to early child development. Research-based evidence must be supported and expanded both in PEI and across Canada to facilitate the development of new research projects, and to create mechanisms to review and assess early childhood issues. Considering and exploring community members' experiences and knowledge appears to be crucial for improving early childhood service delivery. As Mahon (2004) states, "Social services are delivered in communities. It is this level which is most capable of recognizing specific needs" (p.1). Furthermore, Clyde Hertzman (as cited in Mahon, 2004) argues that it is the "members' communities" (p.2) which are more likely to be sensitive to community values and needs. Based on these ideas, action research appeared to be a valuable tool to support the five networks of the PEI Children's Secretariat which decided to explore recognized gaps and needs within their communities. The action research was grounded in data that, in these five particular cases, was provided by the network members' responses and facilitated by the RECD research team. The action research cycle—plan-act-observe-reflect (Stringer, 2007)—was fully explored by the five networks within their own communities.

### Procedures

After the various networks had identified specific questions or issues, the RECD team supported the networks to explore these within their local contexts. In some cases, a research assistant (RA) was hired to support the process of conducting a literature review, data collection, and data analysis. In addition, one of the co-principal investigators for the RECD initiative worked with each of the networks. During this phase of the projects, the research coordinator (RC) met regularly with the RAs and maintained regular communication with the chairs of each network. To better manage the short timeframe in which these projects had to be developed and implemented, the RAs were asked to design a work time-line. Additionally, the RAs received assistance in organizing the projects' process through different phases (i.e., Phase 1: literature review). The project phases were reviewed many times with the RECD co-principal investigators and the RC. Each phase review and discussion reinforced the action research continuous process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting for the RAs, the network members, and the RECD team members.

The Family Literacy Network, the Exceptional Needs Network, the Parent Support Network, and the Early Childhood Education and Care network each wrote a final report that included the research processes and findings. The Child Injury Prevention Network developed an ethics proposal for further project work which has been submitted to the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) Research Ethics Board for approval. A brief summary of the five networks and their projects are listed and described below.

### 1. Child Injury Prevention Network

**Title:** Parent Focus Groups on Child Safety Needs: A Developmental Approach from Pre-natal to Age 5

**Description:** a project to explore current knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes of parents regarding injury prevention for infants and children from conception to age 5.

**Summary:** The network chair and members expressed a clear understanding of the need to develop research from PEI that could benefit parental awareness about young children's injuries. For this purpose, the RECD team connected network members with faculty members from the School of Nursing at UPEI, whose main areas of research are related to healthy child development (ages 0 to 8). Numerous meetings were held between these two groups to discuss the best approach for a research project. The School of Nursing faculty members have completed a research proposal for submission to the UPEI Research Ethics Board. After approval is received, the research project will explore the nature of safety information needed by parents in two different target groups (higher and lower education), and at two different stages (pregnancy and post-natal) as well as exploring the packaging and delivery mechanisms preferred by parents.

### 2. Early Childhood Education and Care Network

**Title:** The Voice of Play

**Description:** a project that developed tools to empower early childhood educators to effectively promote the value of play.

**Research Assistant:** Brenda Goodine

**Summary:** The literature review for this project was completed through international and national documentation. The value of play and current definitions of play were examined in various documents and research studies. Based on the literature review findings, several tools

were developed aimed at two audiences: parents and early childhood educators. The tools that were created consisted of a PowerPoint presentation (accessible in CD format through the PEI Early Childhood Association (ECDA) website), a brief multimedia presentation, a manual for educators, and an information poster. A network committee continuously met with the RA to review and discuss the package of tools. Supported by this project's findings and with the completed tools, the network will be discussing future plans for training, piloting, and implementing the resources.

### 3. Exceptional Needs Network

**Title:** Navigating the System Report: Feedback and Suggestions

**Description:** a project that reviewed a previous network report and developed the linkages for a new research project.

**Research Assistant:** Anna Baldachinno

**Summary:** A careful and intensive reading of an earlier report was conducted by the RA. Findings, methods, and results were discussed from a rigorous research perspective between the RECD members and the network's chair. The RECD team met with many network members to discuss the previous report and future action plans. A major gap was subsequently identified by the network: information about the number of children with exceptional needs in PEI is unclear and limited. Based on this project's findings, the network has decided to continue its research actions. Contacts have been made with a researcher at UPEI's Faculty of Education to continue with a future research project that will explore definitions of "exceptional needs," as well as the number of children with exceptional needs across Prince Edward Island.

### 4. Family Literacy Network

**Title:** The Family Literacy Network—How are we doing?

**Description:** a project that explored origins and history of the Family Literacy Network with the aim of identifying the network's future direction

**Research Assistant:** Melanie Melanson

**Summary:** An intensive literature review was conducted after reading previous reports from the PEI Children's Secretariat, previous meeting notes, and the *For Our Children* report (2000). Individual interviews with previous and current network members and chairs were conducted and analyzed by the RA. Findings were shared with the current

chair of the network. Supported by this project’s findings, the network will be discussing future plans of action with regard to member recruitment, projects delivered, and evaluation of projects. The framework developed by this network will be shared with the other PEI CS networks who could also be interested in exploring their network’s history.

## 5. Parent Support Network

**Title:** Parent Support Network Research Project

**Description:** a project that explored the efficiency of using social networking tools to better reach parents.

**Research Assistants:** Sara Arsenault and Anna Baldachinno (with collaborations from Esther Duncan and Gabriela Arias de Sanchez)

**Summary:** Reviewing literature that described the pros and cons of different networking tools was the first phase conducted by the RAs. Data was collected using an email questionnaire, to which a number of the network members responded. The RECD team mapped the members’ answers with the aim of observing common trends and characteristics, as well as possible gaps in the methods currently used by the Parent Support Network members. Based on this project’s suggestions and findings, the network members will discuss and suggest further steps for better promoting their services, especially to families considered to be at risk.

### Follow Up to the Projects

As part of the action research process, the five networks shared their research processes and findings with the rest of the PEI Children’s Secretariat members; other community members such as school board representatives were also present at that meeting. The meeting took place on January 27, 2010, at UPEI. During that opportunity, the five network chairs explained the purpose of the research projects and the RAs described how the research projects were conducted. Each of the five networks presented their findings for approximately 15 minutes with 5 minutes for questions at the end of each presentation.

### Key Learnings

“Action [r]esearch begins with hopes, dreams and desires” (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009, p. 5). The desire to change is rooted in questions such as *what if?* and *how could we?*

- The action research process with which the five networks engaged began with a desire to change, improve, or better understand practices. A more in-depth consideration of these starting points led to the need for members to explore the

answers within their own organizations. Data was grounded through a rigorous research process rooted in the experiences of network members. Therefore, the network projects' research findings are supported by a solid research component, and this research-based evidence data is now guiding future steps for the five networks.

- The action research process enabled the members of the five networks of the PEI CS to broaden and deepen their understanding of the collected data through continuous participation and discussion by all the members involved. However, the process was not always precise or predictable; people's involvement, schedules, desires, and motivations were sometimes diverse. Organization of meetings and events was time-consuming and in some cases, the networks appeared to rely on one person's decisions (mostly the network chairs). The RAs' work was supportive for the network members and crucial for the success of the projects. For the RECD research team, working with graduate students facilitated the efficiency of the data collection and data analysis processes.
- The RECD framework is based on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner's model acknowledges that humans do not develop in isolation but in relation to their family and home, school, community, and society. He maintains that each of these changing and multilevel environments, as well as the interactions among these environments, is key to children's development. Though each of the network projects developed within one of the different nested systems described by the RECD model (child, family, community, society, global), the five network projects were clearly different from each other. This variety resulted in a clear picture about specific needs and gaps that each of the five projects identified. However, all projects were developed with the understanding that improving network practices had a common purpose, which was to better serve PEI's young children and their families.
- Dissemination of the results was an important component of the action research process. After working for a few months, most of the members of the networks who had engaged in the action research process were ready to share their findings and new knowledge with other members of the PEI CS. This need raised awareness of how the networks need to share their work more frequently. This sharing could help the members of the networks enter into discussions about common research projects to develop new findings which could inform the work of all networks. The richness of the presentations led to important and interesting discussions that involved other PEI Children's Secretariat networks. Based on these discussions, it appeared that new strategies and/or future research projects could be undertaken by collaborative efforts of different networks within the PEI CS and with government agencies such as Public Health.

## Moving Forward

The RECD research team has been able to develop a clear understanding of the process of action research with many members of the PEI CS. The value of research has also been more deeply understood by most of the network members. The action research approach appears to be a valuable tool which facilitated members' involvement and engagement with the research process. As one of the co-chairs said, "A culture of research has been developed within the PEI Children's Secretariat."

- The RECD team suggests that the PEI CS continue its efforts to support the development of new projects which are framed around a solid research component. Collecting evidence-based data will facilitate the networks' accountability within their own organizations (and therefore with their own community members) and also within the PEI CS.
- The RECD team recommends that the PEI CS continue to support the networks' discussion and sharing of future research findings. These research sessions could continue to serve the purpose of breaking down the silos to work more cooperatively across and within sectors as well as to continue to develop research capacity.
- Future dissemination within the PEI CS members is crucial; however, research could make an impact if it is also disseminated within provincial government, and to parents, educators, professionals, and other PEI community members. As one member stated in April 2009: "We need our own research in PEI." These five projects are the starting point that perhaps could inspire many to address that gap.

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