

Change agents

Professional development for adult educators

How can the professional development of staff be used to bring about lasting change in adult and continuing education (A&CE)? That's the question behind new research from Canada led by Dr Alexandra Youmans of Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, and Dr Lorraine Godden of Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. They look at how school boards in eastern Ontario have come together to meet the demands of the province's three-year Adult Education Strategy. The strategy aims to promote collaboration between school boards in order to increase accessibility to adult education and improve outcomes for adult learners.

There are many reasons why people drop out of their high school education, from bullying or family circumstances, to having unrecognised learning difficulties.

While some will still go on to have fulfilling and successful lives, a lack of skills and qualifications can affect people's health and wellbeing, as well as their employment and economic prospects. It can also put people at risk of exclusion from today's digital society and knowledge economy.

Many adult learners have complex lives and their educational needs are often overlooked. However, in 2016 the Ministry of Education in Ontario, Canada, launched a three-year Adult Education Strategy to help improve the way adult education programs are delivered across the province. The strategy focused on developing strong regional school board networks in the hope that this would help to increase the accessibility of adult education

and improve educational outcomes for adult learners.

Funding to implement the strategy across seven regions in Ontario was linked to deliverables in four areas. School boards had to collaborate and share responsibility for adult learning, and learning programs had to be accessible and respond to adult learners' specific needs. In addition, school boards were encouraged to support the educational pathway for adult learners by offering more consistent career guidance and counselling, and making it easier to get academic credits for existing learning and life experience.

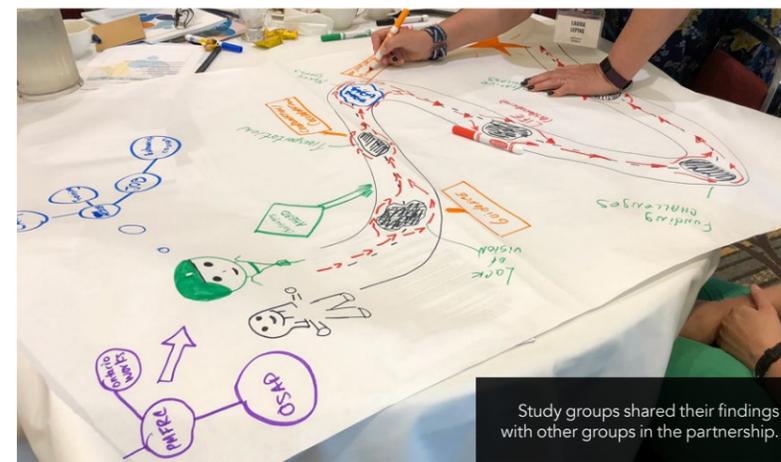
In newly published research, Dr Alexandra Youmans of Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, and Dr Lorraine Godden of Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, look at how school boards in eastern Ontario implemented the provincial Adult Education Strategy. The results of Youmans' and Godden's study suggest that paying greater attention to the professional development of teachers and support staff can help to bring about lasting change in adult and continuing education (A&CE).

A PROCESS MODEL

To meet the provincial strategy's objectives, eight school boards in eastern Ontario formed a coalition – the Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education (ERPAAE). The partnership began with an environmental scan to scope existing adult education provision and help partnership members plan how they would meet the Adult Education Strategy's objectives. The second year was dedicated to capacity building among adult education staff, including educators, guidance counsellors, principals, administrators and program managers. The third year



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was focused on piloting innovative approaches to adult education.

Individual study reports are available for each of the three years from 2016 to 2019. In a recently published paper, Youmans and Godden look specifically at a process model developed in the second, capacity-building year. The Coalition Model for Professional Development (CMfPD) aimed to help partnership members use professional learning to effect change and identify suitable initiatives for pilot projects in the final year.

COLLABORATION, CONTINUITY, AND CARE

Youmans and Godden used a literature review to help the partnership identify

three essential components to its model for capacity building in professional development: collaborative structure; continuous learning; and a culture of care.

The schools boards involved in the partnership had already begun to collaborate by forming a coalition in response to the Adult Education Strategy's demands. Their collaborative structure went further in that they employed a co-ordinator and worked together to create vision and mission statements for the project. They also created study groups on different aspects of adult education. These enabled members to learn from each other and identify what the region was already doing well, what challenges

it faced, and what opportunities there were for innovation.

Comprising representatives from every school board in the region, the study groups shared their topic's findings with the other study groups in the partnership. Study group members also reported back to their individual school board teams who then had to develop an innovative practice which was in turn presented to the partnership.

This process of continuous learning and communication was amplified by a series of four, two-day programs of presentations and activities designed to foster teamwork and shared learning. The first session focused on the study groups' topics, and the second looked at how different school boards currently addressed the associated issues. The third session introduced experience from outside the region, and the final session consolidated learning and identified ideas for innovation.

School boards are more used to competing for scarce resources than collaborating. The partnership's culture of care helped to build trust and give participants the confidence to share their thoughts and experiences. This was also fostered by having a coordinator who, as a former school principal, was experienced in adult education locally. Face-to-face sessions provided additional opportunities for study group members to receive feedback and support.



The Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education focused on capacity building in the second year of the Adult Education Strategy.

PROFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND GROWTH

Youmans and Godden used semi-structured interviews with 22 members of the partnership to examine participants' experience of the CMfPD.

Professional understanding was assessed according to the newly developed protocol of 'affirming, learning, and yearning', ie, what was affirmed that participants already knew, what was learned that was new, and what was missing that participants yearned to know more about.

Interviewees reported having learned a lot from participating in the capacity-building sessions. Whether they were educators, career or guidance counsellors, administrators or education managers, they yearned for more knowledge, especially education managers.

In addition, members valued all three of the model's components – collaborative structure, continuous learning, and culture of care – in helping them to achieve professional growth. They said that this increased their capacity and encouraged collaboration to bring about change.

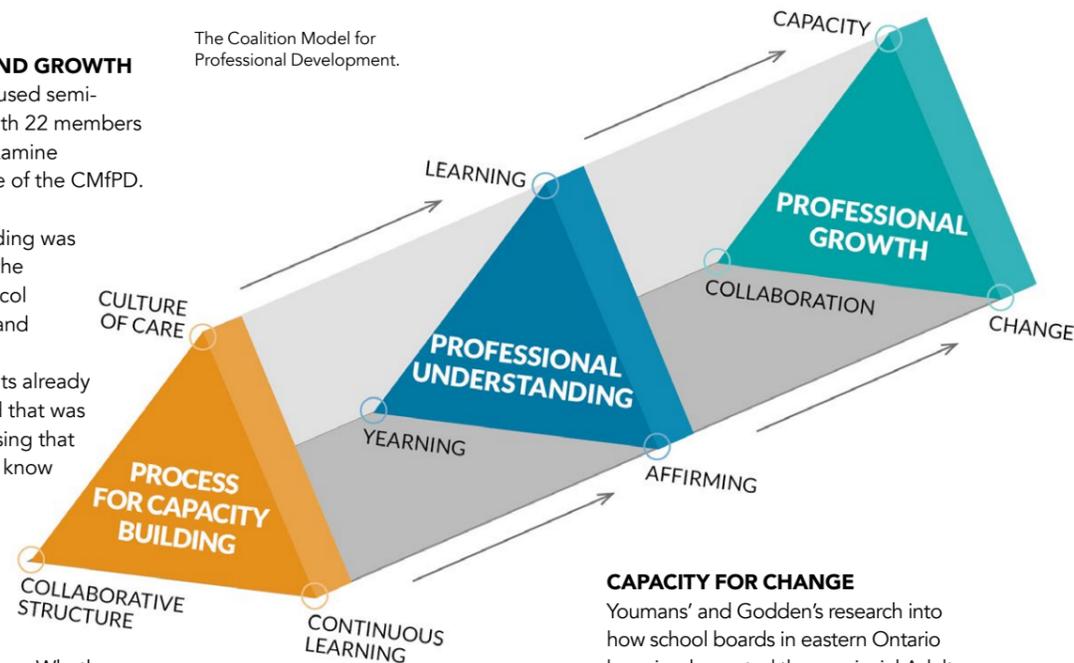
Interviewees also said they had benefited from the model's collaborative structure and the opportunity to learn from each other and to develop working relationships

Paying greater attention to the professional development of staff can help to bring about lasting change in adult and continuing education.

with colleagues from other school boards. They appreciated sharing best practice and working together to improve adult education in their region.

Most people recognised that the model's continuous learning approach helped to build their professional

The Coalition Model for Professional Development.



capacity. This included increased knowledge of adult education in general and of specific practices in particular. They were also more aware of the different roles of all those engaged in the adult education process, from educators to guidance counsellors, principals, administrators and program managers.

Although a culture of care is more commonly associated with students, the staff interviewees also found that a supportive environment helped their professional development and the partnership as a whole. In particular they felt it helped to develop a sense of collective responsibility to improve

the quality of adult education in their region. The researchers attributed the partnership's success not least to the effectiveness of the co-ordinator who, unlike many professional development course leaders, was not an outside expert but someone known and respected locally.

CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

Youmans' and Godden's research into how school boards in eastern Ontario have implemented the provincial Adult Education Strategy is a substantial body of work that provides valuable insights for all those involved in adult education, in Canada and further afield.

They find that the strategy created networks which allowed the range of professionals involved in adult education to come together to exchange best practice and explore innovative initiatives to support adult learners. By focusing on professional development of staff, it also helped to build capacity across the region's school boards.

Youmans and Godden argue that the Coalition Model for Professional Development (CMfPD) established by the eastern region partnership is of particular note and that it may have wider application in other areas of education – or even other disciplines – where system-wide change is needed.

Most importantly, those who took part in the program reported that working in collaboration and increasing their professional capacity left them feeling better equipped to bring about positive and lasting change in adult and continuing education.

As one administrator commented: 'What I've really enjoyed about these sessions is feeling as if our voices matter, that they're contributing to something that's very important, and that we're all being heard.'

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Dr Alexandra Youmans and Dr Lorraine Godden document Adult Education Strategy in eastern Ontario, Canada.

Detail

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Bio

Dr Alexandra (Sandy) Youmans is an adjunct assistant professor at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Canada. She is passionate about equipping educational professionals with the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and resources to support learner success. Her research includes adult education, collaborative inquiry, programme evaluation, and elementary mathematics education.

Dr Lorraine Godden

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Personal Response

One of the Adult Education Strategy's annual reports quotes a member of staff as saying there is a stigma attached to adult education. How does the Coalition Model for Professional Development help to address this?

Despite its transformative nature, there is stigma associated with adult education for learners and staff alike. The Coalition Model for Professional Development helps reduce stigma by affirming the importance of this field and emphasizing the value of the work done by adult education staff. Typically, adult education has been under-resourced and under-funded in Ontario. The Adult Education Strategy provided a unique opportunity for relevant staff to develop capacity through a collaborative network, equipping them to better meet the needs of adult learners. //