

**CARN/IPDC Conference 2012**  
**Towards Creative Action: Transformations and Collaborations in Practice**  
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Community Action Research – improving practice and learning through collaboration  
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The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) in the National College of Ireland is a community-based educational initiative aimed at addressing educational disadvantage. Operating as a partnership between local parents, public health nurses, early years settings and schools, ELI has developed innovative programmes to raise the educational aspirations of families and to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of children and young people in the Docklands.

A community action research approach (Senge and Scharmer 2001), which focuses on changing practice, understanding of practice and the conditions of practice (Kemmis 2009), is used. An infrastructure and process, which ensures the systematic and continuous involvement of parents and front-line service delivery staff in programme planning, implementation and evaluation, has been developed. Regular reflective, purposeful interactions harness the creativity, enthusiasm and commitment of participants and make the sharing of knowledge and practice easier. A challenge can be finding time to collaborate and communicate, both within individual services and throughout the network. While the flexible and non-prescriptive approach used by ELI is considered strength by the participants, it can pose a challenge for evaluation.

Over 2,500 children, parents and professionals actively engage in ELI's programmes each year. A recent independent evaluation found that ELI's cross sectorial networks were working effectively to enhance educational outcomes for children and their families (Share et al 2011).

Five years of experience in working on a variety of community action research projects has developed a sense of ownership and responsibility from all involved. Improving outcomes has been most successful where cross organisational learning communities were fully involved in programme development and delivery. This approach supports the implementation of change in a way that enhances participants' capabilities, both individually and collectively, to produce results they truly care about (Senge and Scharmer 2001).

Kemmis, S. (2009) Action research as a practice-based practice, *Educational Action Research*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 2009, 463-474

Senge, P. and Scharmer, O. (2001) Community Action Research: Learning as a Community of Practitioners, Consultants and Researchers, in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. [Eds.] (2001) *Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: Sage

Share, M., Mc Carthy, S. and Greene, S. (2011) *Final Report - Baseline Evaluation of the Early Learning Initiative*, Dublin: Children's Research Centre, Trinity College (unpublished)