

# What's at Stake and What's at Play? The Unspoken Realities of the Power Dynamics in Collaboration

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### THE CASE

The Young Child (YC) project offered an illustrative case to unpack the challenges of early-stage collaboration involving stakeholders from small and large non-profit organizations, public institutions (such as health, education), government institutions (such as Ministry of Children and Family Development, Settlement), local government, and philanthropic organizations (such as United Way of BC, Vancouver Foundation).

These organizations came together to develop and implement a new multi-agency and multi-funder project to serve newly arrived refugee families and their young children. The project incorporated expertise from three non-profit organizations to co-create and co-manage a wraparound hub of services that included early childhood programming, mental health services, food and nutrition programs, and outreach support.

The co-management model distributed leadership and responsibilities across the three agencies and combatted the traditional 'lead and sub' contract relationship that often occurred in the non-profit sector.

### THE STUDY

This study focused on an early childhood development project in Western Canada involving non-profits, funders, and government bodies collaborating to access new resources for newly arrived refugee families with young children.

The study aimed to understand how participants experienced and navigated power dynamics in collaboration and the impact on their participation.

The case study data included 1:1 interviews, project and policy document analysis, media articles and the researchers' reflexive journal.

The case, the Young Child project, was studied during its initial pilot phase (2007-2011) and is bounded (Yin, 2018). The qualitative study analyzed stakeholders' experiences from non-profit and government organizations involved in collaboration in a geographically and culturally diverse community in Western Canada. The study findings shed light on cultivating conditions for collaboration that distribute power amongst diverse stakeholders in the early childhood sector and beyond.

### THE FINDINGS

1. Make it Personal and Relational
2. Design Early and Design Together
3. Co-construct Creative and Interactional Spaces
4. Use Stories to Engage Stakeholders
5. Understand the impact of the broader socio-economic-political ecosystem on collaboration



### THE ROOTS OF COLLABORATION

Organizations were working together through early childhood planning tables, funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the United Way of the Lower Mainland. The concerns about newly arrived refugee families with young children was identified by members at this table. The table coordinator took the problem to key funders to gain an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of settlement, early childhood and mental health concerns facing these children and families, while the program and service structure at that time, was not meeting these needs in any integrated or holistic way.

The concern with growth - add in refugee settlement numbers and city demographic growth was a concern to the family-service nonprofit organizations. The coordinator represented the mutual concerns of the organizations to potential funders in order to gain support to innovate a multi-agency, wraparound, one-stop model. Funder interest and commitment grew through the iterative process of dialogue between the Coordinator and key community nonprofits and identifying potential political and policy windows open in the political and funding landscape.

The Young Child project tested a collaborative structure to engage the multiple funders to integrating funding sources and learn together through regularly structured meetings with project. The aim was to create space for ongoing dialogue and shared learning as the project developed and evolved. This design tested a shared governance model where the traditional forms of power between funders and fundees was neutralized by creating a shared space of learning and decision-making as the project unfolded.

In the community, this project was touted as an exemplar of project and governance excellence. It remains to this day, a unique and unparalleled model that has yet to be duplicated in the same way or achieve similar successful outcomes.

**"This was the beauty of the project: the opportunity to do things differently, make a change, and be creative, in ways we had never done before."**  
(Study Participant)



### THE PROBLEM

Collaboration is a messy, complicated, and relational practice, involving stakeholders from different organizations to purportedly achieve consensus on mutual aims. It is a socially constructed process where vision, goals, and outcomes are determined by the stakeholders involved as they dialogue and co-construct the process and walk the journey together.

### THE QUESTIONS

While collaboration is often presented as the preferred approach to reduce duplication and improve outcomes, stakeholders involved are left to negotiate different interests, values, and aims (Gray, 1989) while navigating varying power and capacities (Gray & Purdy, 2018) in real-time. The process of collaboration interacts with the policies and politics in the ecosystems (Weaver-Hightower, 2008), which impacts both the stakeholder experiences and the overall aims of collaboration.

- How do practitioners describe their experiences and what can be learned for future collaboration?
- What discourses do participants use to describe their positionality?
- In what ways, if at all, do narratives and documents reflect how power and democratic participation intersect?

### THE POWER OF "WE"

We talked a lot about guiding principles at the beginning...

We kept going back to our original set of guiding principles...

...it was in the same way that we had built the Office of Early Childhood with this idea of coordinating the funders, coordinating the major public players...

We need a collective approach...

We worked through and finalized a conceptual approach...  
We had to ensure that it was embedded within each of those partners...

We need to pay attention to this in order to make sure people are feeling and understanding the need to have a collective approach...

#### The Collaboration Continuum

Compete	Co-Exist	Communication	Cooperate	Coordinate	Collaborate	Integrate
Competition for clients, resources, partners, public attention.	No systematic connection between agencies.	Inter-agency information sharing (e.g. networking)	As needed, often informal, interaction, on discrete activities or projects.	Organizations systematically adjust and align work with each other for greater outcomes.	Longer term interactions based on shared mission, goals; shared decision makers and resources.	Fully integrated programs, planning, funding.

Source: [collaborationforimpact.com](http://collaborationforimpact.com)

#### Unpacking Power in Collaboration: "spirit of partnership"

There are additional steps inside of collaboration that were fleshed out in this research:

Co-ordinate	Co-construct	Co-design	Co-fund	Co-manage	Co-learn/own
Centralized coordination brings diverse partners in; helps navigate broader political and policy ecosystem. Non-traditional partners gain power. "Liaise behind the scenes" to "pull the ideas together"; "I know her, I trusted her"	Find the origin or compelling story that creates a shared understanding of the issue(s), makes it personal, and meaningful to the stakeholders. Helps to deepen their understanding. The power of stories and emotions.	Partners work together to design from the beginning. A "hand in hand" process. Creates opportunity to leverage the "right people at the right time, under the right conditions". Gives every partner has a role to play. There is space for different forms of power.	Bring multiple and diverse sources of funding together distributes power, politics and institutional positionality. Creates a container for responsibility and accountability. One funder didn't get their way. Everyone comprised. "There was too much money on the table to not make it work"	Distribute power through co-management and not a traditional lead-sub relationship. "Shared ownership". It's not always easy thought.	Regularly bring partners together in a governance structure for joint learning and sharing. "We wanted representatives of the funders not just to hand out money and walk away, but to actually be part of learning about refugees as a whole community and learning about the actual operation and outcomes of an innovative project"

While non-profits are often expected to work together to integrate services and reduce silos/duplication, they are often not funded appropriately to take on the burdens and labour of this work. The tensions, navigation, tolls on individuals when interpersonal conflict arises, conflict between organizations, amongst many other issues are further complicated when these same organizations compete with each other for limited funding sources. The expectations to collaborate in one project and compete in others, situates non-profits into unfair paradigms while adding burden to make things work in order to access funding that is often necessary for their very survival.

In spite of this, the Young Child project achieved significant success for many years. Using a social constructionist view (Burr, 2003; Burr, 2015), the researcher, who was involved in this project since its inception, was curious:

**What was it about this project that made it successful?**

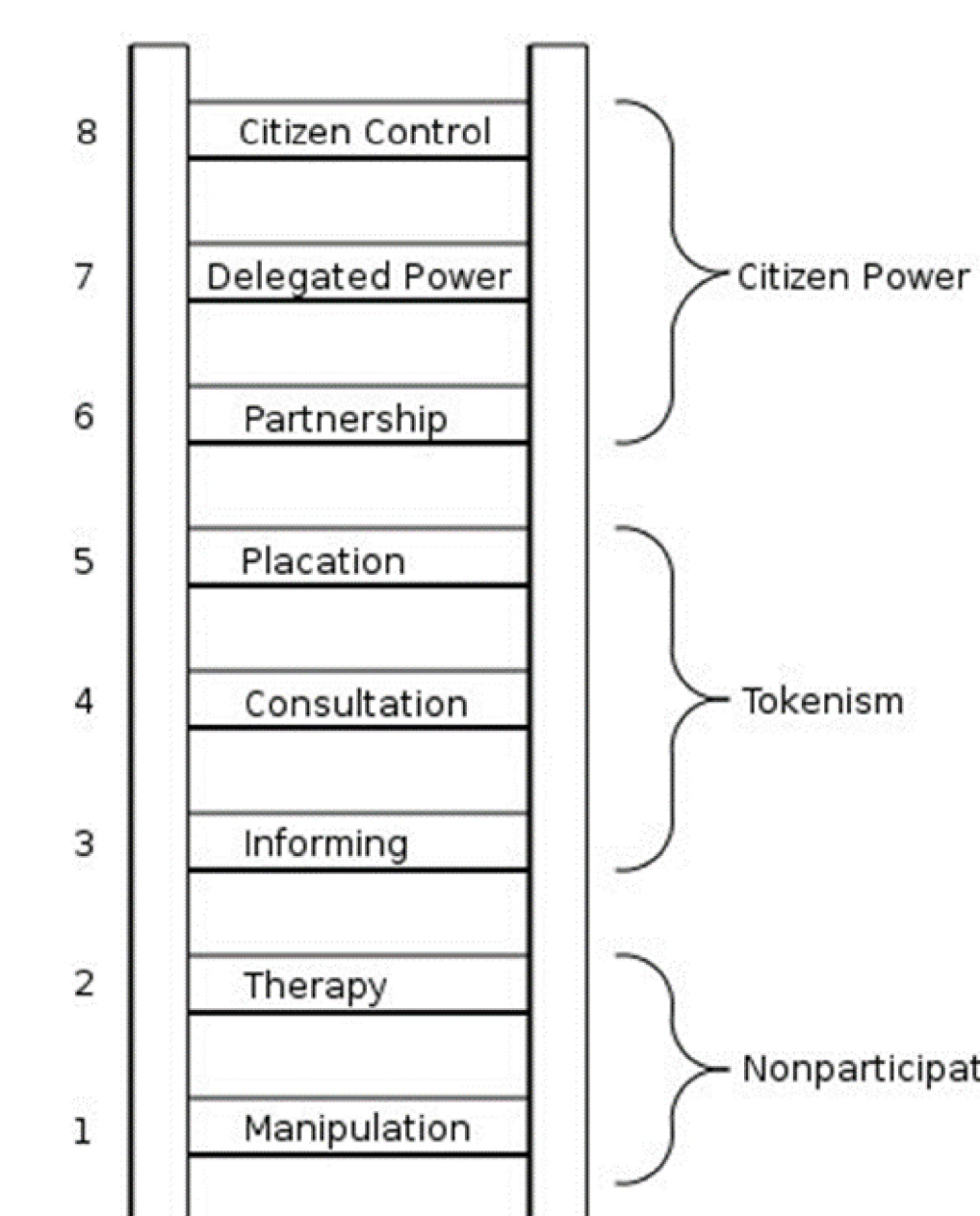
**Were stakeholders able to distribute and share power, even though they did not declare this as an explicit goal?**

**What was the experience like for the individuals navigating this new way of working together?**

**What can be learned and shared with others?**

### THE FRAMEWORKS

The Ladder of Citizen Participation. Arnstein, 1969, p. 217



Categorization of Forms and Orientations of Power.  
Gray & Purdy, 2018, p. 121

Forms of Power	Categorization: Power Orientations			
		Power over	Power to	Power for
	Authority	Impose unilateral decision	Decide how to decide	Endorse collaborative efforts
	Resources	Take action independently	Participate in decision making	Provide means for broad participation
Discursive Power	Create social pressure for a given action	Manage meaning or sanction a decision	Represent those who cannot participate	

### COLLABORATION IS DESIGNING EARLY AND DESIGNING TOGETHER

This whole concept of bringing together organizations who work together, usually differently and in silos ... to come together to bring their staff together, to create this program together ... from scratch, from the design.

(Jane, Community Planning Table Coordinator, study participant)

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