



For the Common Good: Rob van Pagée on Family Group Conferencing in the Netherlands

By Molly Jenkins

A Pure and Simple Process

In the Netherlands, family group conferencing (FGC) is known as *eigen kracht*, which literally translates to “own strengths” or “own capabilities.” Following the New Zealand model, eigen kracht conferences emphasize the strengths, capabilities, and leadership of citizens and family groups in decision making processes, such as those concerning the safety, well-being, and care of children. Eigen Kracht Centrale, a Dutch nongovernmental social work organization, first implemented conferencing in 2001, and since that time, the program has continued to grow and expand; by the end of 2009, more than 3,000 conferences had been held. Eigen kracht conferences can be applied in many diverse settings and situations, such as when decisions need to be made regarding child welfare, domestic violence, impending evictions, and juvenile justice; when there is conflict or harm in communities, neighborhoods, or schools; or when a family group needs to convene to collectively make plans for themselves or one another, including elderly family members in need.

The director of Eigen Kracht Centrale is Rob van Pagée, a former child maltreatment social worker who, after years of traditional casework practice, felt that families, extended kin, and support networks deserved a stronger voice in the decisions that affected their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Van Pagée first became aware of FGC at a workshop and thought the practice would be a great fit for the Netherlands. He consulted with several international FGC experts, such as Gale Burford, Mike Doolan, and Paul Nixon, before implementing the practice. Although some were resistant to the concept of FGC at first, it has since gained widespread and enthusiastic support from the community, Parliament leaders, and funders who have recognized the positive impact of eigen kracht conferences. According to van Pagée, this support is in part because the process resonates; it is simple, it is natural, and it begs the question, “If your family was in the same boat, what would you want for them?”

Power to the People

Much like FGC in other countries, eigen kracht conferences are guided by a number of core principles and values. Fundamentally, eigen kracht originated from the fervent belief that families’ strengths and knowledge can and should be harnessed when important decisions need to be made regarding their future. After all, it is the family group — not professionals — who know themselves and their unique circumstances best, and they deserve “to be in charge of their own autonomy” (van Pagée, 2007, p. 104). As van Pagée pointed out in a recent interview (June 3, 2009), “Who could be against a process that is all about family strengths?” As well as engaging family groups in leading eigen kracht conferences, van Pagée has also expanded on the process with an element that is truly one of a kind: involving everyday citizens of the Netherlands as independent conference coordinators. While van Pagée recognizes and appreciates the “social experimentation” aspect of this distinctive approach, he emphasizes that sharing power with the public will have positive impacts for all citizens, especially those who become directly involved in the eigen kracht process.

In her article, *Sharing Power With the People: Family Group Conferencing as a Democratic Experiment*, Lisa Merkel-Holguin (2004) suggests that FGC can be used as a mechanism for promoting “the democratic ideals of voice, freedom, justice, fairness, equality, and respect” (p. 155). If the central and characteristic pillar of democracy is the notion that power lies in the hearts and minds of all people, then eigen kracht is undoubtedly a democratic and democracy-promoting process; it honors families’ leadership and right to self-regulation in case planning and actualizes social equality by sharing power and responsibility with fellow citizens to the advantage of all. In addition, Merkel-Holguin argues that democratization benefits child welfare decision making, especially since child protection is widely considered to be a concern that affects the public as a whole. It is important to note that while many processes such as eigen kracht conferences should be commended for their promotion of family engagement and democratic



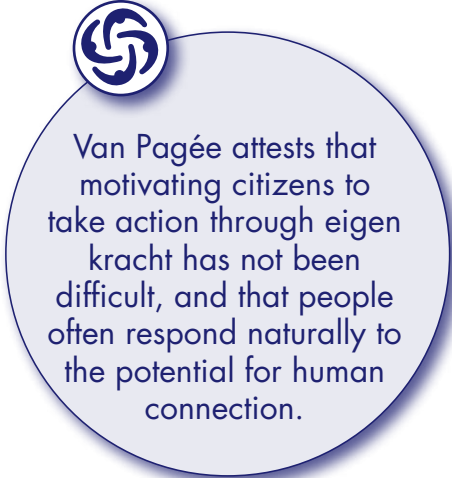
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principles, we must not overlook the sometimes necessary application of professional input during a conference for the sake of ensuring the best interests of children. John Braithwaite (2004, p. 203) asserts that, "...a democracy will not be a democracy unless it builds in checks and balances against tyrannies of the majority, especially when the majority are adults and the minority are children." While family members lead the decision making process, the Coordinator works with all the participants to reach a consensus-based decision. It is the Coordinator's responsibility to "ensure that in the negotiation process of finalizing the plan, the family group's basic decision is upheld" (American Humane Association, in press). Thus, the family group and agency professionals are agreeing to implement the agreed upon plan. Because most family groups tend to make thoughtful, responsible, and informed decisions, it is rare when professionals do not accept the plan.

cultural, language, and professional backgrounds are encouraged to become involved to help guide families through the process and ensure that their needs are respected. To quote van Pagée from a 2007 interview, a coordinator "may be a piano tuner, a butcher, a salesman ... secretaries are excellent because facilitating a conference requires, above all, strong organizational skills" (Wachtel, 2007). Van Pagée attests that motivating citizens to take action through *eigen kracht* has not been difficult, and that people often respond naturally to the potential for human connection. "You are one of them," he tells citizens. "You know their experience" (personal communication, June 3, 2009).



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Accordingly, *Eigen Kracht Centrale* does not actively "recruit" citizens to become conference coordinators, but rather, tries to identify individuals who would truly enjoy and take pride in the position.

Many current coordinators became interested in the opportunity through word-of-mouth or by participating in a conference themselves, for instance as extended family members and social supports. Because the Netherlands is such a diverse society (more than 250 ethnicities exist within the country), *Eigen Kracht Centrale* often has ample opportunities to "match" coordinators with family groups according to culture and language. This can help families feel more respected and at home throughout the process, thus underscoring their strengths and capabilities as caregivers and decision makers. Furthermore, culturally and racially diverse citizen coordinators may serve to lessen the power imbalance that often exists between families and professional social workers, the majority of whom are highly-educated and/or White.

Van Pagée is careful not to emphasize the role of the coordinator over that of the family group, saying, "Coordinators are not the key; the family is the key group" (personal communication, June 3, 2009). Likewise, to ensure that the family owns and has full control over the decision making process, *Eigen*

Citizens Taking Action

Nobel laureate Jose Saramago once said, "As citizens, we all have an obligation to ... become involved. It's the citizen who changes things" (Merritt, 2006). FGC in the Netherlands follows a similar philosophy — that when citizens take action and work toward the common good, real and lasting change can be realized. According to van Pagée, "An *Eigen Kracht* conference is not a source of assistance, not an intervention or help, but a decision-making process that makes citizens active" (van Pagée, 2007, p. 105). As stated above, one distinct aspect of *eigen kracht* conferences is that they employ citizens — not child welfare professionals — as independent conference coordinators. According to van Pagée, this revolutionary element of *eigen kracht* conferences helps promote understanding and fairness among fellow citizens, and provides a "multifaceted method of not only recognizing, but also taking responsibility for public interests" (van Pagée, p. 105). In essence, citizenship is fostered and communities reap the collective benefits. People from many diverse



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Kracht Centrale requires that the coordinator be a fully independent person. In other words, the coordinator can have no interest in the content and implementation of the family's plan, otherwise he or she may have dual and conflicting interests in the conference outcome and the family's confidence in the decision making process may be threatened. Therefore, these facilitators may not be employed by helping institutions. In addition, coordinator training is purposefully minimal; it is typically a 3-day training with the conference itself being a part of the training assessment. Too much training, van Pagée believes, can actually harm the purity and simplicity of the eigen kracht process, and may likely reinforce the needs and power of the coordinator, rather than those of the family group. Van Pagée reports that most coordinators respond well to this level of training and go on to coordinate and facilitate successful conferences. Before coordinating a conference, citizens commit to doing at least one eigen kracht conference per year; however, most do two or three. This speaks to the high level of coordinator commitment and suggests that many gain a sense of purpose and joy through their conference involvement. In order to communicate that their dedication is valuable, Eigen Kracht Centrale compensates each citizen coordinator for his or her time and contributions. On occasion, some coordinators have even decided to forego payment, and have donated their funds to Eigen Kracht Centrale to put toward further conferences, thus helping sustain the citizenship model. As of June 2009, Eigen Kracht Centrale had employed approximately 400 (and growing) citizen coordinators.

Momentum Is Gaining

Are eigen kracht conferences sound and effective? Conclusions from 2008 research conducted by Free University, Amsterdam; PI-Research; and WESP Research Bureau (a Dutch organization active in the fields of youth care and restorative justice) indicate overwhelmingly positive and promising results (Eigen Kracht Centrale, 2009). Chiefly, the number of family safety and well-being concerns tends to rapidly decline following an eigen kracht conference,

and remains relatively stable over the long term. Additionally, one finding noted that families and support networks attend to the same child safety concerns (and with the same degree of care) as do professionals, but that families pay more attention to child well-being factors, such as fun time with friends. These findings suggest that when families take the lead in decision making, children are just as safe and may in fact be living happier and more well-rounded lives. Additionally, many families indicated that participating in an eigen kracht conference was beneficial and worthwhile. For example, 9 months following a conference, more children were living with their families and trusted networks than in out-of-home care. Likewise, families were not only satisfied with the conference and the coordinator, but they were also significantly more content with their familial and social relationships 9 months after a conference than they were before the conference. While these results are indeed encouraging, they also



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speak to the importance of post-conference follow-up with families, something van Pagée believes is an essential aspect of the process. Finally, the research concluded that since there was an average of 13.6 participant attendees per conference, professionals also greatly benefited from eigen kracht through the enhanced opportunity to build relationships with extended kin, social support networks, and community members.

Given these encouraging research findings and support for FGC from parliament leaders, van Pagée is hopeful that eigen kracht will soon become the law in the Netherlands. First of all, eigen kracht conferencing is compatible with current Dutch child welfare legislation, such as the Youth Care Act, which emphasizes the centrality and needs of clients and families. Secondly, the Netherlands would not be the first country to legally mandate FGC in child welfare; New Zealand has been doing so successfully since 1989. Van Pagée would also like eigen kracht to be recognized as a new and accepted way of practicing social work in the Netherlands by including eigen kracht philosophy and practice in social work curricula and education programs. "Social



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workers have become ‘solution makers’ rather than asking families what they need,” says van Pagée. “Eigen kracht is a process of people doing things for themselves This is social work” (personal communication, June 3, 2009).

Coming Full Circle

One of the many keys to eigen kracht’s success has been its focus on the import of promoting and sustaining human connection and togetherness. Eigen Kracht Centrale has been very creative in its efforts to achieve this ideal. For example, van Pagée regularly organizes social events, such as film festivals, to energize existing coordinators, communicate with citizens who are interested in coordinating, reconnect with families who have participated in conferences, and converse with community members who are interested in eigen kracht. In the future, van Pagée would like to expand the eigen kracht model to other arenas, including health care facilities, prisons, and professional working environments. Recently, Eigen Kracht Centrale launched E-Circle, an innovative and interactive online tool that allows family members, social support networks, and coordinators to stay connected and engaged with each other post-conference. Each family has its own web page that includes the family members’ contact information and support networks, details regarding the agreements made during the conference, and an interactive calendar that can help with scheduling get-togethers and tasks that need to be completed according to the family’s plan. Due to young people’s increasing interest in and skill with technology, van Pagée has noticed that children often enthusiastically volunteer to be the “webmasters” of their families’ pages. This experience ultimately serves as an empowering and enriching opportunity for children, and provides a fun way for family members, friends, and even citizen coordinators to communicate and support each other over time.

One could easily say that van Pagée and others at Eigen Kracht Centrale are pioneers, changing the face

of social work and citizenship in the Netherlands one circle at a time. By encouraging citizens to take action by becoming coordinators, eigen kracht is going a long way toward advancing and actualizing the meaning of fairness, democracy, and strength through connection. Enriched citizenship not only promotes the well-being of individual children and families, but also facilitates collaboration so that whole communities care and are cared for. After all, we are all in this together.

For more information on Rob van Pagée and eigen kracht, please visit www.eigen-kracht.nl.

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