Beyond the Looking Glass: a multi-methods approach to interdisciplinary investigation of interprofessional education

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This paper reports on an interdisciplinary research design that explores the complex interdisciplinary and interprofessional education (IPE) strategies that are expected to lead to collaborative approaches in practice. The World Health Organization regards IPE as a key component of health professional practice (1). However the evidence for the success of current IPE approaches in terms of health care outcomes is not strong (2). Different disciplines have different assumptions and biases and therefore different conceptions of IPE. Furthermore the suggestion that professions should learn together may be flawed (3), with some models reinforcing professional stereotypes (4) and heightening tensions in relation to power and knowledge ownership (5). The Scottish Government's programme, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), puts child and family at the centre, requires working across organisational and traditional discipline boundaries, and is committed to the improvement of interprofessional practice (6). This major policy development, enshrined in law, sets the context for interprofessional education development in Scotland. The aim of this research is to generate an interdisciplinary understanding of key terms and issues amongst practitioners and educators across children's services, in order to make recommendations for IPE development within higher education settings needing to respond to similar integration policies.

An interdisciplinary research approach consisting of literature reviews, discussions within the research group and interviews with practitioners and educators across the sector, is being used to explore how key concepts in IPE are understood as well as the role of the university in embedding values and skill sets in curricula that lead to greater interprofessional communication and collaboration. The entire research process is heuristic, iterative and reflexive (7,8).

Each member of the research team has reviewed the literature independently to identify key terms, meanings and derivations. Perspectives were shared in audio-recorded discussions during which assumptions and biases were challenged. These activities took place over two iterative cycles. Discourse analysis of the literature reviews and discussions reveals areas of concordance and discordance, reflecting professional identity development and the degree to which professionals ground this identity within a complex understanding of their professional systems. Key themes are emerging and challenges in interprofessional education are being identified. An ethos of listening appears to be of key importance, and these results have formed the basis for the approach to interviews with practitioners and educators and the coding framework for transcripts of those interviews.

Each researcher is conducting semi-structured interviews within and across professional boundaries with a focus on (i) understanding of key terms and concepts e.g. what is professional judgement, risk assessment, strength-based approaches, child-centred care, interprofessionalism, co-production (ii) examples of IPE and the facilitators and barriers and (iii) how universities could support interprofessional practice and interdisciplinary-mindedness. In each interview we will draw on image work to set the context. Participants will be invited to choose those most relevant and crucial in their view from a range of images suggestive of different approaches to interprofessional education and practice. From this contextualising discussion the interviewer will ask more explicitly how the participant understands these key concepts. The responses to these questions are designed to begin to build a picture of the organisational culture and the cultural issues within it. This will enable questions that further probe an understanding of how concepts are embedded within cultural practices: what within higher education culture enables skill, leadership, ability, motivation and does this clash or complement the culture within the sector? How might they move to a common support culture? To check that the interviewer understands how the participant is using and relating these concepts to each other, they will sketch a model of this and invite the participant to help them modify this so it is correct. Each interviewer will undertake discourse analysis of their own interviews, and also the transcripts of other interviewers. Interviews will be conducted in two rounds to allow testing of emerging hypotheses about areas of congruence and discord. At each iteration of the analysis strategies are developed for how to effectively explore the understanding and use of key terms and cultural issues.

The entire iterative process (literature reviews and interviews), re-examining interprofessional understandings from multiple perspectives, is of key importance in this research. Each step includes explicit consideration of discipline perspectives (researchers', interviewees' and literature). The process is mapping how differences in more commonly used terms within practice interact to produce differing understandings of higher order terms that describe general professional approaches and stances.

Future research will develop and test interprofessional education interventions, determine transferability of the interdisciplinary research approach to other multiprofessional settings and suggest a future role for the university in supporting IPE.

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