

Final year students' views about working collaboratively with other professionals

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Background

Integrated early childhood services provide families with seamless access to range of education, health and social supports. They are particularly beneficial for families experiencing "multiple, complex, interrelated and cumulative social and health challenges" (Wong & Sumsion, 2013, p.341), such as those with mental health issues, substance abuse, dealing with domestic violence or where someone in the family has a disability. Integrated early childhood services have been advocated for and developed at various times in Australia since the 1920s, however, they have never been sustained (Wong & Press, 2013).

Recent Australian and international research has identified a wide range of factors that influence the provision of integrated early childhood services, including social policies, governance, leadership, organisational culture and ethos, and frontline workers' characteristics and predispositions (Sumsion et al., 2010). In particular, integrated services require frontline workers with willingness, knowledge, skills and capacities for working in collaborative, inter-professional ways. Little is known, however, about the views of graduates from early childhood-related courses in relation to working collaboratively with other professionals. This project explores the preparedness of final year students from early childhood education, speech pathology and nursing courses, across three universities for working in collaborative and integrated ways.

Theoretical perspectives

Although many theoretical perspectives could be used to explore the factors influencing final year students' views and their preparedness for working collaboratively with other professionals, we were drawn to those with potential to lead to better understanding of the individual nature of these factors, while also taking into account contextual factors.

Because individual professional practice decisions are often central to the adoption of practice innovations (such as collaborative practice and/or inter-professional working), it would be valuable to have more empirically-driven information about the mechanisms underlying the adoption of "new" professional practices or behaviours (such as collaborative practice and/or inter-professional working). The theories considered included social psychology theories which, broadly speaking, seek to explain how people think about, feel about, relate to, and influence one another (Schneider, Gruman, & Coutts, 2012) and in particular, *Theory of Planned Behaviour* (Ajzen, 2005), which has been used as the basis for studies as diverse as health professionals' clinical practice-related behaviours such as compliance with guidelines (Maue et al., 2004), and teachers intentions to use technology (Smakola, 2008).

According to Michie and colleagues (2005), some important theoretical domains to investigate may include students' understandings about: the nature of the work; their knowledge and skills; their attitudes towards collaboration; their experiences of working collaboratively with other professionals in integrated ways; and their beliefs about barriers and facilitators.

Research questions

1. How do final year students define "working collaboratively with other professionals"?
2. What do final year students see as the advantages and disadvantages of working with other professionals? [Behavioural beliefs]
3. What do final year students see as the barriers and facilitators to working collaboratively with other professionals? [Control beliefs]
4. Which individuals and/or groups are identified by final year students as approving and disapproving of them working collaboratively with other professionals? [Normative beliefs]

Research design

This is a mixed methods study involving (i) a qualitative elicitation study, undertaken via focus groups with final year students; (ii) a quantitative cross-sectional self-administered survey with final year students. It will be undertaken at three universities forming the Excellence in Research in Early Years Education Collaborative Research Network: Charles Sturt University, Monash University, and Queensland University of Technology.

Participants

Part 1: Focus groups

- CSU: 4 x focus groups each with 6-8 participants with 4th year Bachelor of Speech Pathology, Bachelor of Occupational Therapy, and Bachelor of Nursing students;
- QUT: 2 x focus groups each with 6-8 participants with 4th year Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students; and
- MU: 2 x focus groups each with each with 6-8 participants with 4th year Bachelor of Early Childhood Education students.

Sample: Convenience samples aiming to capture a range of students' views.

Venue: University campuses, in rooms familiar to the students (e.g. teaching rooms, library).

Duration: 1-1.5hours.

Facilitators: Research team members at each University.

Digitally audio recorded and transcribed.

Part 2: Survey

Based on the focus group findings, and using the theoretical models posited by the reviewed research, a survey will be developed.

Sample: All final year students will be invited to participate (CSU n=100; QUT n=130; MU n=150).

Mode: (i) online via QUT's KeySurvey platform and (ii) as a paper and pencil questionnaire.

Duration: 10 minutes to complete.

Focus group interview schedule (condensed version)

Opening Question: Define " working collaboratively with other professionals"

- We want to know what you think about working collaboratively with other professionals. Let's start with painting a picture of what it might "look like" [+ several prompting questions]
- Generally, in your opinion, what does it look like when professionals work collaboratively together? What have you noticed? [+ several prompting questions]

Behavioural Belief Questions – advantages and disadvantages

- What do you see as the advantages or good things that would happen if you worked collaboratively with other professionals?
- What do you see as the disadvantages or bad things that would happen if you worked collaboratively with other professionals?

Control Belief Questions – barriers and facilitators

- What situations or conditions would make it difficult or impossible for you to work collaboratively with other professionals?
- What situations or conditions would make it easier make it easier for you to work collaboratively with other professionals?

Normative Belief Questions – who is this important to?

- Who (individuals or groups) do you think would object or disapprove of you working collaboratively with other professionals? (get help with prioritizing if necessary)
- Who (individuals or groups) do you think would approve or support you working collaboratively with other professionals? (get help with prioritizing if necessary)

Closing Question: Other issues

Are there any other issues that come to mind when you think about working collaboratively with other professionals?

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