



Full length article

Young children shaping interprofessional practice in early years settings: Towards a conceptual framework for understanding experiences and participation

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ABSTRACT

The value of interprofessional service provision for children and families has had widespread support internationally. However, researchers have called for greater focus on service users' experiences to inform future development. Nonetheless, young children's experiences of such practice in early years settings are under researched. Drawing on findings from a study of interprofessional practice from the perspectives of five young children with additional needs, this article suggests a theoretical and methodological conceptual framework as a guide to understanding how children participate in and shape integrated service provision.

The stance is framed by social practice theory, whereby our everyday practice draws on, challenges and is constrained by history, context and relationships. Shotter's (2008) work revealing meaning-making in conversational exchanges and Dreier's conceptualisation of trajectories of participation (2003, 2008) guided the analyses of digital video recordings of children's participation in interprofessional practice in early years settings. Findings showed young children shaping the nature of provision. The theoretical constructs and methods revealed the otherwise hidden dialogic nature of interprofessional practice, highlighting children's influence on elements of fine-grained expert practice. Careful attention to children's perspectives, revealed through analysis of their multimodal voices, contributes to settings' capacity for planning, modifying and evaluating effective integrated working.

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1. Introduction

Interprofessional practice (IP) in children's services has been on the agenda now for some considerable time internationally (Wong & Sumsion, 2013). Interprofessional practice (also referred to as collaborative and/or integrated practice), brings together the expertise of a wide range of professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, and is especially important for responding appropriately to the needs of, and supporting the best outcomes for, children and families who are facing multiple and complex challenges, which might include disability. In England for example, progress was made in service design and structural arrangements of integrated early childhood services, particularly during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Sure Start Children's Centres, for example, were tasked with ensuring that early childhood services in their local geographic area

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were made available in an integrated manner, often co-located in a one-stop, information, health, care and education services hub for families with children from pregnancy to age five-years (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013). Likewise, in Australia, integrated service delivery is one of the four key focus areas of the Council of Australian Governments' National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care (Allen Consulting Group, 2011; Wong, Sumsion, & Press, 2012). However, research into interprofessional work in early years settings *other* than children's centres has been limited. More limited still has been the research into young children's experiences and the ways in which they participate in provision incorporating interventions and guidance from various services and professions (Wong & Sumsion, 2013).

Researchers have called for greater focus on the experiences of service users in relation to interprofessional practice to inform its future development (Anning, Cottrell, Frost, Green, & Robinson, 2006; Freeth, Hammick, Koppel, Reeves, & Barr, 2002; Tucker, Strange, Cordeaux, Moules, & Torrance, 1999; Wong & Sumsion, 2013), addressed partially by Bertram, Pascal, Bokhari, Gasper, and Holtermann (2002), and to a greater extent by Aubery and Dahl (2006), Broadhead, Meleady, and Delgado (2008) and Kellett, 2011. The evaluation of 29 pilot Early Excellence Centres (forerunners of Children's Centres) in England by Bertram et al. (2002) reported on the impact of the services on young children and their families, rather than their experiences, reporting gains for children including enhanced social competence, cognitive development and early remediation of special needs (Bertram et al., 2002, p. 1). They also noted positive impacts on the training, competence and confidence of practitioners. Aubery and Dahl's (2006) with children aged between five and eleven years showed that children held valid and sophisticated views and information to share with regard to their experiences of services. Broadhead et al.'s (2008) addressed the role of early years staff in day-to-day practice in one Children's Centre in the north of England, incorporating the voices of families using the services. It showed how a centre imbued with community-led aspirations can alter the lives of families. In relation to the ways in which interprofessional practice is experienced by young children, research reported in Payler et al (2008) suggests that separate and distinct discourses operate with regard to 'therapy' and 'play' during the routine daily implementation of therapeutic inputs in early years settings, potentially influencing children's participation and learning.

This paper discusses theoretical concepts and research methods useful in understanding the participation of young children with additional needs, drawing on exemplar findings from a small-scale study. The study involved children aged three to four years who had been identified as having additional needs requiring the intervention of more than one agency or children's services' professional. Most of the children's verbal language was still in an emergent form and the children had been referred for speech and language therapy. The research question addressed here is:

How do children experience and participate in aspects of interprofessional practice in early years settings in England?

However, while the study used for exemplification was based in England, this paper's unique contribution is to suggest a conceptual framework for interprofessional practice research that extends beyond geographic boundaries. It outlines a theoretical and methodological approach to scrutinise the complex nature of social practice at the point at which IP interventions are implemented on a daily basis between young children and early year practitioners. The aim of the framework, then, is to suggest a way of attending to how young children respond to, participate in and contribute to IP, thus making it possible for practice to be scrutinised and to unravel how good practice can happen.

2. Policy and research context

It is possible to identify different strands of policy motivating research into children's perspectives of interprofessional practice. Human capital policy (Heckman & Carneiro, 2003) looks for research evidence to demonstrate that investment in any kind of initiative in the early years is effective in producing some kind of later gain (as exemplified in Bertram et al., 2002, above). Research into interprofessional practice motivated by this policy will be designed to demonstrate that investment in special or targeted provision in the early years which involves interprofessional practice is associated with a decrease in later costs to the state, and in particular a reduction in the 'financial burden' that 'special education services place on municipal budgets' (Layton, 2015, reporting on Muschkin, Ladd, & Dodge, 2015). Finding out from the child on the receiving end of interprofessional practice – consulting the end-user – could therefore be interpreted as leading to more efficient and effective use of intervention funds.

Research into children's perspectives is also motivated by very different considerations concerning the extent to which services are meeting children's rights. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) children have the right to have their views respected (Article 12) and to freedom of expression (Article 13) and these rights apply to all children (Article 2: United Nations, 1989). Signing up to the UNCRC means countries commit to upholding all 54 articles and Article 4 states that Governments' responsibility to implement children's rights under the Convention may involve legislative, administrative and other measures, although it is up to individual countries to decide how best to implement the UNCRC. In England and Wales, for example, the Children Act of 1989 and subsequent policy and legislation reflected the three interlinked aspects of the UNCRC: provision, protection and participation (see Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2010), and it is the latter which promotes children's involvement in decision-making through expression of their own views. There is therefore not only a moral but also a legal obligation (Lundy, 2007:939) to take account of a child's wishes and feelings in decisions that affect them. This has led to the development of techniques and processes for building relational interaction with children (Nind & Hewett, 2006), for consulting children about their environment (Clark & Moss, 2011), to involve them in research (Kellett, 2010), to

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