

## Interprofessional practice

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### Background

The policy initiative *Every Child Matters* has set the context within which schools operate today and will develop in the future. Extended schools are the vehicle through which this policy initiative will be realised. At the heart of the concept of the extended school is multi-agency working and interprofessional practice. There is a patchwork of interprofessional practice across the country – some schools are fully operational and others are in the early stages of development. All participants on programmes within the Department of Professional Development (Foundation degrees, MA programmes and the EdD) work within this relatively new multi-agency, interprofessional context.

The concept and construct of interprofessional practice is therefore one which must inform the future development of all programmes within the Department if programmes are to relate to, and meet the needs of, participants. In order to be in a position to inform current programmes and shape the development of new programmes we need to develop an expertise in this field. Funding was sought to help us to be better informed to develop new MA modules in curriculum innovation and multi-agency working in schools. The expertise developed will also enable the Department to rethink pedagogical practices in line with multi-agency work.

### Approach/methodology

Information was gathered from:

- a systematic literature review of national and international interprofessional practice
- critical engagement with policy documentation and policy makers to determine the government's position on inter-professional practice
- interviews and observations with education-related professionals in multi-agency settings.

Material developed from the research will be made available to participants (students) during taught sessions, individual readings and reading groups and through the new Faculty *Journal of Research into Professional Development*.

### Outcomes

As already noted, this is a highly complex area of research, focusing as it does on professional identities, personal lives, individual perspectives and ambitions and, for many people, their life's work. It seems clear from the empirical data gathered from this small scale study that simply legislating for change is not a guarantee of success. Indeed, change in working practices and professional identities demands a process that will need investments of time and commitment to be made to the new construction of practices. Service targets, professional resources and budgetary concerns remain constraints in many areas. However, the key concerns from this project's data appear to be that of the successful development of cross-professional relationships and management of some very complicated new structures. The development of more effective systems of communication, both formal and informal, need also to be constructed.

From existing literature in the field it seems that there is currently an oversimplification of the issues and therefore oversimplified solutions are being proposed. The first is in the criticisms of professional mistrust and tension between agencies often made by those misunderstanding the complexity of professional roles undertaken in new political and policy landscapes. The second is that the suggestion of a simple creation of a new layer of professionals trained across professional boundaries would serve only to dilute professional expertise, alienate professional colleagues and ill serve the individuals, families and communities in need.

Instead, from the literature and research in the field, three core changes seem to emerge:

The first is for a conceptual change to enable professionals to engage in working practices that take responsibility 'holistically' for children and their families. This would minimise the existing problem of families seeming to 'ping-pong' between services.

Secondly, the suggestion has been made that a skilled 'systems minder' might negate communications problems as well as reducing the difficulties faced by key workers forming unsustainable relationships with children and their families.

The third centres on the need for training. While keeping professional identities intact, training could be focused on the development of reflexive and communicative practices rather than the rebranding of professionals. Such training would need to keep issues of language, culture and attitudes firmly at the centre.

This project has pointed to the need for further research and study and has clearly identified how subtly complex such research is. This of course mirrors the complexity of work in the field where relationships are often seen by many to be the key to successful working, particularly with vulnerable children and families. Others find that carefully constructed systems clarify and objectify the work. It is always possible to find aspects of the service that appear successful, or small teams that operate effectively for a variety of reasons. However, some of the literature reviewed pointed to the absolute need for reflective capacity to be built into working structures. While this is perennially challenging in terms of time and financial commitment, it would seem that an inclusive Masters level study programme is one way of simply facilitating this. It would also enable those professionals currently working in interprofessional services to engage in research to inform, critique and perhaps to challenge existing practice. The project has indicated that enabling 'insiders' to research their own world and develop their own professional voice is not only an attractive way forward but possibly the only effective way to develop the field.

Students who engage in study emerging from work on this project will benefit from opportunities to work with other professional colleagues in critically examining their work, the policies and politics that direct it and the research that informs and underpins it. In addition, they will be supported in developing their own theories of practice and in creating research projects of their own in which to test ideas and develop implications for practice. Their work will be supported by tutors who are themselves engaged in these critical endeavours and who have developed ways to critically engage with research, policy and practice literature in the field.

Tutors working in this field are at the forefront of new professional practice. There are opportunities to collaborate in many ways – across traditional professional boundaries, with students who are engaged in their own professional enquiries, and across local and national boundaries, as this is a universal issue currently being examined by colleagues across the world.

## Enhancing RIT

From the perspective of the learner, the MA modules developed will present a range of contemporary national and international 'best practice' in this complex field and will enable a careful critique to be made of them. Participants will be encouraged to articulate existing knowledge and expertise in terms of practices and supported in their development. In addition, they will be challenged to critically examine contentious issues and complexities surrounding this new policy arena. The principles of inter-professional practice underpin many related areas (such as interprofessional coaching and mentoring) and will serve as a theoretical basis for further applied areas of study.

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