

# Creative pointers for teaching practice informed interprofessional working

*Cathy Murray and Gillian Ruch, University of Southampton*

## Background

Effective social work curriculum design needs to open up dialogue between professionals at the earliest stage of their professional development and employ creative and innovative approaches to facilitate this. The ten creative pointers presented here emerged from research into social work practitioners' views of the implementation of Children's Integrated Services (within the context of the Every Child Matters agenda and passage of the 2004 Children's Act). The research set out to identify current practice related pre-occupations amongst child care social work practitioners and to identify the key obstacles to and opportunities for effective inter-professional working. Throughout eight interactive sessions participants highlighted the tensions which they experience in interprofessional working. These include the defensive dynamics between professionals and the impact on working relations of professional status and power hierarchies. The data point to the importance of the curriculum engaging directly and head-on with such entrenched interprofessional issues. It also raised particular questions for curriculum design and delivery including: What is interprofessional working understood to be 'on the ground' and how is it best delivered in the curriculum? How can we help students understand the issues they will face in interprofessional working? How can we make interprofessional working more alive in the curriculum?

This helpsheet offers some pointers for students, academics and practice educators involved in social work qualifying and post qualifying programmes. It sets out to make a practice-informed contribution to the social work curriculum relating to interprofessional working with children and families.

## Findings



Embed interprofessional working across the academic and practice curriculum at qualifying and post-qualifying levels, so that it is not merely a 'bolt on'.



Adopt experiential approaches as a preferred teaching and learning strategy for delivering interprofessional training, for example role play and vignettes.



Incorporate exercises into the curriculum which explore the impact of differential professional status and hierarchies on interprofessional working on the ground.



Develop strategies for helping students to acquire a comprehensive range of skills, which include those required for working in challenging and confrontational situations, for example assertiveness and de-escalation, as well as empathic listening, skills.



Ensure that contributors to the academic curriculum are drawn from a range of professionals (for example police, GPs, health visitors, teachers, early years workers, legal profession).

## Findings continued...



Encourage reflective practice which draws on different types and sources of knowledge to promote understanding of diverse professional responses to challenging situations.



Bring interprofessional working alive by providing more opportunities for face-to-face exchanges with other professionals, such as joint training initiatives.



Recognise the importance of exploring the tensions between professional and personal boundaries in interprofessional encounters and provide forums for attending to these.



Ensure opportunities are routinely provided within the practice setting for students to engage in direct joint working with other professionals.



Strengthen the distinctive role and professional identity of social workers to enhance their confidence to work in interprofessional contexts.

## Relationship-based models of reflection

An innovative qualitative research method was used throughout this study to elicit social workers' perspectives of interprofessional working in the context of Integrated Children's Services. Eight sessions lasting for one hour were convened with practitioners from child care teams in a local authority over a period of eight months from 2008 to 2009. The method adopted utilised a relationship-based model of reflection, which draws on current thinking in the fields of reflective practice and critical reflection. Within a 'safe', containing space, practitioners were enabled, by a facilitator, to explore and discuss current practice-related preoccupations arising from the Every Child Matters agenda and the integration of Children's Services. This practitioner-led approach differs from traditional methods, such as focus groups or individual semi-structured interviews, in that it invites practitioners to explore their current inter-professional experiences in an inclusive and reflective manner and data are generated from both the content of the reflective discussions and the process of the group interactions. The methodology helped to highlight the role that reflection can play in promoting inter-professional working.

## Further reading

Barker, R. (ed) (2009) *Making Sense of Every Child Matters: Multi-Professional Practice Guidance*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Foley, P. and Rixon, A. (eds) (2008) *Changing Children's Services: Working and Learning Together*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)  
University of Southampton School for Social Sciences  
SO17 1BJ

Tel: +44 (0) 23 8059 9310

Email: [swapteam@soton.ac.uk](mailto:swapteam@soton.ac.uk)