

Leading into interprofessional practice

A report prepared by Dr Sandie Wong and Ms Kay Turner
for SDN Children's Services' Ethics Committee

2014

Abstract

This paper is a brief report of the findings of the project ‘Leading into Interprofessional Practice’. It includes the background to the study, the methods used, a summary of major findings, ethical considerations and publications arising.

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Background to the study

This study investigated the leadership of *SDN Beranga*, an autism specific early learning and care service, during its establishment phase.

There is a growing number of children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Australia and worldwide (Samms-Vaughan, Franklyn-Banton, 2008). Children with an ASD and their families have complex and diverse needs. To address these diverse needs, in 2009 the Federal Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs funded the establishment of six autism specific early learning and care centres, based on the Early Start Denver Model of early intervention for children with an ASD (O'Brien Rich Research Group, 2012). At the same time, the New South Wales State Government Department of Family and Community Services, Ageing, Disability, and Home Care funded the establishment of one autism specific early years demonstration service in Greater Western Sydney. SDN Children's Services in partnership with Aspect was selected as the provider. The service - SDN Beranga (now operated exclusively by SDN Children's Services) - offers the expertise of a range of professionals (e.g. early childhood educators, psychologists, occupational therapists and speech language pathologists) who work with children and families. Research suggests that the most effective way professionals can work with children and families is through *collaborative, interprofessional practice* (Moore, 2008; Nichols & Jurvansuu, 2008).

Collaborative interprofessional practice is a relatively new way of working in early childhood (EC) services that has received international prominence (Branson, Vigil, & Bingham, 2008; Rao, 2005; Rose, 2009; Zhang, Schwartz, & Lee, 2006). There is a small, but growing, body of literature that argues for the benefits of collaborative practice, identifies factors that support and hinder collaboration and provides insights into how to sustain and manage collaboration (see Wong & Sumsion, 2013 for a review of the literature). In particular, this work identifies *effective leadership* as an essential element in developing sustainable collaborative practices in inter-disciplinary teams in EC settings (Booker, 2011; Colmer, 2008; Patton, 2007).

Research on leadership in EC, both in interprofessional teams and more generally, is somewhat limited however. In a review of the literature, Muijs, Aubrey, Harris and Biggs (2004), for instance, note a lack of research in leadership in EC settings and in particular call for research that "explores what is meant by effective leadership in early childhood settings" (p.167). More recently, Booker (2011) argues that whilst leadership is recognised as an important aspect in effective interdisciplinary teams "there has been little further analysis" (p.1). Further, research that has been conducted in interprofessional teams that examines leadership tends to examine leadership in established teams – often retrospectively reflecting back on the establishment phase. Such studies are limited by the recall of the participants and may be 'flavoured' by hindsight. There appears to be no published work of research that has examined, in-depth, the role of leadership as it happens during the establishment phase of a collaborative interprofessional EC service – and none that has examined interprofessional work in an autism specific early years' service.

This project was designed by Dr Sandie Wong from Charles Sturt University and Ms Kay Turner, Executive Director of Integrated Services and Organisational Development. Its aim was to document

leadership experiences, challenges and learnings as Ms Turner strove to develop a collaborative, interprofessional team at SDN Beranga – during the establishment phase of the service.

This report has been prepared for SDN Children’s Services, Ethics Committee as a record of the project. The report explains the methods used, summarises the major findings from the study, comments on ethical considerations and notes publications arising from the project.

Method

The project was designed collaboratively by Dr Wong and Ms Turner. The design is informed by cultural historical activity theory (CHAT - Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999) that identifies a range of elements (including: goals, subjects, artefacts, community of practice, rules, division of labour) that potentially impact on the activity of leadership.

Following ethics approval from both Charles Sturt University, School of Teacher Education Ethics Committee and SDN Children's Services' Ethics Committee, data were gathered using three methods: professional reflective sessions, collection of documents and photographs, and a site visit.

Professional reflective sessions

Reflective sessions between Dr Wong and Ms Turner, lasting up to two hours, were held nine times over a twelve month period from 2012-2013, at Ms Turner's office. The sessions followed a semi-structured format. They each began with the Chief Investigator 'checking-in' with Ms Turner to ensure her continued consent (see ethical considerations). Discussion focused on issues/challenges/insights relating to the development of the service that arose since the last session, and reflecting back on those discussed in previous sessions to determine progress (or otherwise). The discussions were broad ranging and included (for example) matters relating to: organisational goals and objectives / staffing / relationships with other agencies / tools & materials / management & governance. The sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The transcriptions were returned to Ms Turner for checking and approval prior to analysis.

Collection of documents and photographs

A range of organisational documents (such as: project agreements; memoranda of understanding; job descriptions; policy documents etc) were collected for background information. Photographs taken by SDN staff, providing a pictorial history of the progress of the building were also collected. At this point, documents and photographs have been used for informative purposes only - they have not been analysed.

Site visits

Dr Wong undertook one site visit, close to completion of the building, to familiarise herself with the service.

The study's methodology reflects a collaborative partnership (Barnett & Frede, 2001) between the university based Chief Investigator, Dr Wong, and the practice based Co-Investigator Ms Turner. Collaborative research methods enable "researchers and researched to share power, voice and privilege" (Cooper, 2006, p.115). They are particularly beneficial for increasing knowledge within the EC community and, as Cooper (2006, p.117 [citing Le Page, 2001]) argues, "once researchers and practitioners struggle through processes and engage in honest dialogue and negotiation they can develop a 'transformative relationship' that is meaningful and mutually benefiting" (Cooper, 2002). In particular, during the study, through a process of collegial, critical reflection and enquiry on practice, not only were deeper insights into leadership be derived, but it is likely that these insights contributed to the modification and improvement of the service.

Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using CHAT as a heuristic framework. The analysis was in two parts. First, transcripts were read by Dr Wong, and coded at the sentence and/or paragraph level according to which component of the CHAT framework they most closely aligned with (ie: Subject / Artefact / Community of Practice / Rules / Division of Labour / Activity / Goals).

A second level of analysis considered tensions between constituent parts. From this second level analysis several dominant themes emerged which are reported on in the next section.

Summary of major findings

In this section we summarise the major findings from the study. These findings will be reported in an up-coming presentation at the ISCAAR conference (Sydney, September 2014) and subsequently, and more fully, in a journal paper to be co-authored by Wong & Turner.

Several dominant themes related to the leadership of Beranga, emerged from the data:

Having a clear vision

One of the most dominant themes to emerge from the data was the need for the leader to have a strong and clear vision.

In this case, the vision was borne of the leaders' many years experience and practice of working with, and understanding the needs and strengths of, children with autism and their families and of championing the democratic rights of children and their families to high quality early years' services. It is a vision of a nurturing place for children with autism and their families. In this visionary service, children are provided with development enhancing, play-based learning experiences, in relationship with a range of professionals from a variety of professional backgrounds working together.

The vision acted as a 'golden thread' through the development of the program. In times of difficulty and adversity, the leader returned to the vision. And, it seemed that with each challenge, the vision became clearer and stronger.

That is not to say that the leader is rigid in her views. On the contrary, she is flexible and open to persuasion by strong argument, evidence and evaluation. Rather the vision is amorphous enough to tolerate different paths to its realisation. At the same time, the vision provides the diverse staff of Beranga with a common goal to which they could all work collaboratively.

Despite the apparent clarity of the vision, however, there were times when the vision was interpreted in divergent ways by different staff at Beranga. A great deal of work was required to communicate the vision in ways that were understood by all, and to challenge ingrained, taken-for-granted and often unrecognised, mis-understandings, not in-keeping with the Leader's vision of the program.

Addressing challenges

As with any major project Beranga faced many challenges. One of the most significant challenges to the leadership at Beranga was the need to negotiate across two organisations – one focused on early childhood education the other early intervention. Inevitably, this meant compromise. As the leader noted it required "Knowing when to push ahead and when to dig in your heels" (page 15 interview 3). Over time it became apparent that these two organisations, coming as they did from different philosophical and professional paradigms, had differing visions for Beranga and divergent views on how it should operate. Compromises were made, but eventually differences between the two organizations became irreconcilable and one organization withdrew.

This split, whilst viewed by the leader as regrettable was not considered a failure. Rather, it provided the opportunity to reenergize commitment to the vision of Beranga and gave new momentum to the program.

A further significant challenge to the management of Beranga was the delay to construction of the lighthouse service, caused by unforeseen environmental conditions. These events setback the opening of the service by several months.

These tricky situations had to be managed carefully and respectfully. This was done by:

- Informing all stakeholders (families, staff, funding body & community) through open, honest, and transparent communication, so as to allay fears and anxieties;
- Providing alternatives for stakeholders: (e.g. providing alternative services for families or assisting them transition into other services; supporting staff to work in flexible ways with families and providing them with employment facilities in diverse locations);
- Supporting staff: assisting staff to manage their own anxieties and frustrations whilst at the same time enabling them to work in supportive ways with highly stressed parents.

Some other ways the leader managed these and other challenges was by (for instance):

- Forward thinking – heading off problems before they arose.
- Being creative with resources such as using surplus funds to support families in previously un-thought of ways.
- Drawing on professional tools, such as the EYLF, and other organisational policies and funding guidelines, to assist in both setting boundaries, and, conversely, in bringing people together.
- Employing the ‘right’ managers and staff: Managers who shared the leader’s vision and through excellent leadership skills were themselves able to distribute responsibility for realising that vision: Staff who were flexible, skilled in their own profession, but willing and able to think beyond their own expertise to work in other ways. Inevitably, some mistakes were made in recruitment, and staff were employed who were not able to work in these ways. Training and support to work in interprofessional ways were provided to staff, but where necessary, they were supported to reconsider their role in Beranga and sometimes to move on to other employment. The challenge of recruitment was a recurring theme through the data. A major reason for this challenge is the small size of the pool of professionals with experience in working in collaborative, interprofessional ways, on which an innovative service like Beranga can draw.
- Using a ‘hands-off’ management strategy that enabled the leader to keep the ‘big-picture’ in the forefront of her thinking, but which allowed others to manage the day to day running of the program. This required her to: step-back; trust others; and support the day to day managers in their work. The leader exercised her power mostly by shaping debates, asking questions and offering alternatives.

Characteristics of the leader

Analysis revealed certain personal characteristics that supported the leader of SDN Beranga in her role of leading an interprofessional team:

- Strong commitment to the rights of children and their families;
- Extensive experience in management / early childhood education / working with children and families with autism and other disabilities;
- Sound knowledge of the potential role of early intervention social work;

- Sound knowledge and implementation of theory and best practice – especially enacting strengths based approaches and ensuring practices are family-centered;
- Strong professional and personnel support: e.g. having confidantes with whom to ‘de-brief’;
- Trust in herself and trusting of others;
- Being flexible and open to other ways of thinking;
- Emotionally strong – she recognised that making hard decisions would often make her ‘disliked’;
- The leader also has excellent conflict management skills. In particular, during difficult and confronting negotiations she:
 - Prepared mentally: When approaching a potentially challenging meeting, the leader strategically thought through potential challenges that might arise; identified and practiced different ways to negotiate these challenges, and had on hand evidence to support her arguments (e.g. ToR; funding agreements etc).
 - Managed space: During difficult conversations, the leader set up spaces for success (e.g. she arranged furniture to create the desired effect whether that be to exert power, for instance, by sitting at the head of the table, or fostering collaboration by sitting alongside others and sharing meals.

Above all, from a personal perspective, the establishment of Beranga gave the leader an opportunity to be creative. It was personally fulfilling, and enabled her to realise her ideas in practice. Her strong commitment sustained her through difficult and challenging times.

Organisational supports

A number of organisational structures that supported the leader were identified, including:

- flexible working arrangements;
- being trusted by her line manager;
- having support from the SDN Board;
- professional freedom;
- adequate funding;
- good administrative support staff (e.g. secretarial / project management).

Factors such as instability at the organisational level proved challenging.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by both Charles Sturt University, School of Teacher Education Ethics Committee and SDN Children's Services' Ethics Committee. The burdens of this project were primarily due to the intensity and scale of the project and the impossibility of anonymity for Ms Turner. Mitigating these concerns was the fact Ms Turner, as Co-Investigator, was instrumental in designing the project. Underpinning the research relationship was a mutual understanding between Ms Turner and Dr Wong that Ms Turner could withdraw at any time without any negative effects. During the project, interviews were conducted in Ms Turner's office at a time convenient to her. At the commencement of each interview, Dr Wong formally asked Ms Turner if she was happy to continue to participate. Interview transcripts were returned to Ms Turner for verification and/or amendment prior to analysis.

Further, to ensure integrity and mutual benefit, and to maximise organisational learning, this report has been prepared by Dr Wong and checked by Ms Turner. Other publications (including a conference paper and journal article [see below]) will be co-authored by Ms Turner and Dr Wong.

Publications arising

At least three publications will arise from this project. An initial description of the project was presented at the ProPEL conference in Stirling, and findings from the project will be presented in a conference paper accepted for inclusion in the ISCAR Conference. In addition, a paper will be prepared later in the year, for publication in a peer reviewed early childhood journal.

Wong, S., & Turner, K. (2012). Leading into interprofessional practice: A collaborative enquiry into leadership during the establishment of an interdisciplinary autism specific early childhood education service. Paper presented at the *ProPEL International Conference Professions and Professional Learning in Troubling Times: Emerging Practices and Transgressive Knowledges*, University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland, May 9-11.

Wong, S., & Turner, K. (2014). Leading the development of an interprofessional autism specific early childhood education and care service. Paper to be presented at *International Society for Cultural and Activity Research Conference*, Sydney, September 29 – October 3.

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