

Collaboration Among Early Childhood Professionals in Higher Education

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Collaboration among professionals is promoted in various disciplines. In the context of this literature review, I define collaboration as an ongoing multidimensional process that includes interaction, time commitment, the exchange of expertise, and the maintenance of a professional working relationship with stakeholders to promote best outcomes. There is an absence of collaboration among early childhood professionals: those supporting children and families and those in higher education. The absence of collaboration among early childhood professionals is a disservice to children, their families, and future early childhood professionals. Early childhood professionals in higher education have an ethical obligation to collaborate with one another to promote skills, knowledge, and pedagogical practices that will produce graduates of the highest quality. A consequence of collaboration is that graduates will be better prepared to make the greatest possible difference by supporting children and their families to achieve equal outcomes and well-being.

Key words: *collaboration, interprofessional collaboration, reflective group practice, CoPs, social constructivism*

This literature review draws from an organizational improvement plan (Fabbruzzo, 2022) that was completed in partial fulfilment of a doctorate in education, organizational leadership at the University of Western Ontario. In the context of this literature review I position myself as an early childhood professional, specifically a registered early childhood educator in the province of Ontario, as regulated by the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE, 2017). Currently, I am a sessional instructor at two higher education institutions, with my teaching focused on the discipline of early childhood education. Sessional instructors are employed part time or by contract and are nonpermanent teaching staff (MacDonald, 2013). Employment for sessional instructors is precarious, with part-time faculty accounting for 50% of the Ontario university academic workforce (Gismond, 2021). The absence of secure employment is significant, impacting organizational culture and often resulting in faculty working independently of one another (MacDonald, 2013). As sessional faculty move through a revolving door of sessional contracts, they encounter ongoing competition with one another, resulting in disconnection and self-interest—juxtaposed with unity and collaboration.

In my 30-year career, I have worked in various capacities, particularly with communities experiencing risk factors such as poverty, mental health challenges, and sole parenting. Throughout these years I have

witnessed the increasing challenges Canadian children and families are facing, including increased health inequalities and inequalities that affect education achievement and skill development (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018; UNICEF Canada, 2020). On this account, my professional and ethical responsibilities lie with

supporting Canadian children and their families. My current role in higher education involves mentoring and nurturing future early childhood professionals to develop the skills necessary to support young children and their families. However, I cannot do this in isolation. I argue that supporting best outcomes for children and families requires a variety of skills, knowledge, and expertise that can be achieved only through professional collaboration (Anderson, 2013; Health Professions Network Nursing and Midwifery Office, 2010).

I conclude this literature review with calls for action to promote professional collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education. These calls for action are grounded in social constructivism, a theory of knowledge that assumes that knowledge, understanding, significance, and meaning making are actively constructed in coordination with other human beings (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Derry, 2013; Hua Liu & Matthews, 2005; Van Bergen & Parsell, 2019).

Literature review

Collaboration is an ongoing multidimensional process that includes interaction, time commitment, the exchange of different forms of expertise, and the maintenance of a professional working relationship with stakeholders to promote best outcomes (Masin & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Thistlethwaite, 2012).

Collaboration has been defined as two or more people working together to achieve a common goal (Goodsett et al., 2016; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010) and “as all activities that benefit the surrounding environment” (Ljunggren et al., 2013, p. 49). In working environments, the term *collaboration* suggests more intricate ideas. Collaboration is the process of developing and maintaining professional working relationships with a variety of stakeholders to foster best outcomes (Thistlethwaite, 2012). It is a continuous multidimensional process that includes time commitment, interaction, the exchange of different forms of expertise, and a means of working through barriers and challenges that define daily work (Masin & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). In addition, collaborations can foster change, as collaborations create an opportunity to learn from others (Kezar, 2018).

Despite the fundamental benefits of professional collaborative environments, the literature indicates the absence of a culture of collaboration among early childhood professionals, both those supporting children and families (Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Masin & Valle-Riestra, 2007) and those working in higher education (Abramo et al., 2009; Bernacchio et al., 2007).

This literature review focuses on collaboration among early childhood professionals who serve as faculty in higher education programs. The review summarizes how collaboration is defined and synthesizes its benefits to faculty in higher education, alongside the challenges to its facilitation. In addition, calls for action, or strategies for promoting collaboration in early childhood professionals working at higher education, are presented. These strategies can be reflected on and adopted by early childhood professionals in higher education to address their ethical obligation to collaborate with one another to promote skills, knowledge, and pedagogical practices that will produce graduates of the highest quality. Like myself, many early childhood professionals in higher education in the province of Ontario are registered early childhood educators (RECE) and must adhere to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (CECE, 2017). Specifically, the CECE (2017) has specified that the early childhood professional’s responsibility is to “build positive relationships with colleagues by demonstrating respect, trust and integrity, [and to] . . . support, mentor and collaborate with colleagues” (p. 7). Hence, achieving higher levels of collaboration among those working in early childhood higher education programs might influence early childhood education (ECE) graduates while addressing RECEs’ first ethical obligation: responsibilities to children (CECE, 2017).

The guiding question that prompted this literature review was: What does current research report about the state

of collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education?

Methodology

The methodology used for this literature review was a cross-case literature review, a method that involves the in-depth exploration of similarities and differences across a sample of literature (Pare, 2019). The cross-case literature review included a thorough search of Canadian university library databases, including JSTOR, ERIC, and PubMed. Searches were limited to Canadian research published within the last 10 years. Only electronic sources were included, which could have hindered the inclusion of relevant research that was available only in other formats. Initial search terms of collaboration, higher education, and early childhood education yielded limited results, thus stressing a gap in the literature. As a result, the search was expanded to include the terms interprofessional collaboration, health care, and social services. The initial and subsequent searches resulted in a representative review of published research in the past decade.

Search results were manually organized and then analyzed using a literature review matrix (Efron & Ravid, 2019; Garrard, 2017). The matrix method is a system that enables access, integration, and use of information from a variety of sources for the purpose of preparing a written synthesis of the literature (Garrard, 2017).

The emergence of column topics (Garrard, 2017) within the review matrix enabled me to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and compare emerging data in two core themes: (a) forms of professional collaboration and (b) benefits and challenges of professional collaboration. These themes are presented in the form of a narrative synthesis in Findings.

Findings

The literature review highlighted various forms of collaboration, specifically interprofessional collaboration and collaboration for the purpose of professional learning. A brief description of each of these forms, their respective benefits, and a summary of challenges is presented.

Forms of collaboration

It is important to note that these forms of collaboration were not specific to early childhood professionals in higher education, but rather were referenced across literature related to multiple service disciplines including early childhood education, education, health care and social services.

Interprofessional collaboration. As previously stated, interprofessional collaboration is a multidimensional, ongoing process that includes interaction, time commitment, the exchange of different forms of expertise and the maintenance of a professional working relationship among a wide range of professionals to promote best outcomes (Masin & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Payler et al., 2016; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Thistlethwaite, 2012).

Evidence indicates that interprofessional collaboration benefits early childhood professionals (Payler et al., 2016; Wong & Press, 2017). Further, the literature also stresses that interprofessional collaboration also benefits faculty in higher education (Bernacchio et al., 2007; Hill et al., 2007; Payler et al., 2016).

Research suggests that collaborations among various professions improves the perspective of practitioners towards one another. Moreover, collegiality, or improved attitudes towards one another is critical to the interprofessional settings in which early childhood professionals are employed (Thistlethwaite, 2012). In Canada service leaders in health care, social services, and children's services adhere to the model of interprofessional collaboration (Payler

et al., 2016). For example, community health centres (CHCs) provide interprofessional primary care services emphasizing health promotion and disease prevention (Government of Ontario, 2024). Agencies that provide services to children with exceptionalities and their families offer service coordination meetings and a family centered, team approach to providing services (County of Simcoe, 2024; Surrey Place, 2021).

Collaboration is an expectation of the College of Early Childhood Educators (2017) and has stipulated that the early childhood professional's responsibility is to "build positive relationships with colleagues by demonstrating respect, trust and integrity, [and to] . . . support, mentor and collaborate with colleagues" (p. 7). The importance of collaboration is also supported by The Pedagogist Network of Ontario (2020). Finally, Albertine (2017) has viewed collaboration among professionals as an opportunity to direct and advance their own professional learning,

Collaboration for professional learning often takes place in the context of a professional learning community (PLC), a forum for ongoing conversation, professional development, training, and collaboration among professionals (Elliott et al., 2016; Yeo et al., 2019).

Collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education provides an opportunity for interprofessional learning (Albertine, 2017; Hill et al., 2007). PLCs entail many benefits, including the opportunity to maximize faculty autonomy, enthusiasm, and ability (Chandler, 2019; Elliott et al., 2016; Zepeda, 2019). Research indicates that faculty who collaborate for professional learning "are able to continuously adapt courses to further improve student learning outcomes and to reflect rapidly changing fields" (Elliott et al., 2016, p. 2). Overall, Canadian higher education institutes value "the power of positive relationships" and state that "success is dependent on working well together, and on being flexible, facilitative, and collaborative" (Western University Office of Faculty Relations, 2024).

Challenges to collaboration

The literature presents several strategies for facilitating a culture of collaboration. For example, collaborations must be interactive, engage faculty personally and professionally, and promote a sense of ownership and confidence in the process (Hill et al., 2007; Kezar, 2018; Thistlethwaite, 2012). In the case of early childhood professionals in higher education, several articles suggested that the language of collaboration must be ingrained in the pedagogy and culture of early childhood programs in higher education (Kezar, 2018; Schein, 2010; Thistlethwaite, 2012). Abramo et al. (2009) have stated that knowledge sharing and collaboration among researchers is believed to be influential to an increase in research effectiveness; consequently, knowledge sharing and collaboration should be promoted in other disciplines.

The literature also presents several challenges to collaboration, including the absence of the child's voice; individual identity and intellectual property; and hiring policy and practices (Abramo et al., 2009; Bernacchio et al., 2007; Elliott, 2001; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Payler et al., 2016; Thistlethwaite, 2012).

Absence of child's voice

The health care sector has produced extensive research on professional collaboration (Health Professions Network Nursing and Midwifery Office, 2010). This line of studies indicates that children benefit from professionals working together. Interprofessional collaborations often result in new opportunities, services, and improvements in children's development (McWayne et al., 2008; Payler et al., 2016; Wong & Press, 2017). Yet, Payler et al. (2016) have stated that research focused on early childhood education and early learning environments is void of the child's experience as the beneficiary of professional collaborations and as a meaningful contributor to collaborations. Addressing this deficit is critical as the child's voice is an effective tool to intrinsically motivate

early childhood professionals to collaborate, given that meaning making and knowledge construction occur within the relational activity of collaboration (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). In addition, acknowledging children's perspectives allows for a more contingent approach to implementing interprofessional practice strategies, with early childhood professionals acting as coconstructors with young children, aligning with social constructivism (Dahlberg et al. 2006; Moss, 2014; Payler et al., 2016).

Individual identity and intellectual property

Horwath and Morrison (2007) have suggested that individual identity and intellectual property pose challenges to collaboration in higher education. The sacrificing of individual and organizational autonomy is required for collaborations to be effective, despite some professionals' discomfort with the idea (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). Professionals who view collaborative work as an interpersonal experience as opposed to a professional one may place less value on it (Bernacchio et al., 2007). A clear example within the Canadian context is the presence of part-time or nontenured sessional faculty in higher education. These faculty are often unionized, which also creates barriers, as sessional contracts do not require engagement in activities outside of teaching, and unions may frown on members who voluntarily engage in work activities outside of their contract (Abramo et al., 2009; Bernacchio et al., 2007).

Hiring policy and practices

Part-time or nontenured sessional faculty now account for roughly 50 percent of the professional workforce in higher education, limiting opportunities for early childhood professionals in higher education to interact with one another (Gismondi, 2021; MacDonald, 2013). Sessional or contract work poses limitations on faculty's intrinsic motivation to put forth the time and effort required for collaboration. Time, or rather its absence due to hiring policies and practices, is a prominent challenge presented in the literature on interprofessional collaboration and collaboration for professional learning (Elliott et al., 2016; Yeo et al., 2019).

Calls for action

This section presents three calls for action indicated in the literature that can facilitate a culture of collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education: reflective group practice, communities of practice (CoPs), and the development and enactment of provincial and territorial policy that necessitates collaboration among early childhood professionals. Both reflective group practice and communities of practice are grounded in social constructivism, derived from the work of Vygotsky. Social constructivism is a sociological theory that affirms that knowledge, understanding, significance, and meaning making are shaped through social interactions with others (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Derry, 2013; Hua Liu & Matthews, 2005; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Van Bergen & Parsell, 2019; Wenger, 1998). Vygotsky's social constructivism is widely referenced in relation to the education of young children; however, its foundational principles apply to all learners (Derry, 2013). Social constructivism's focus is on cooperative learning and collaboration as the most potent means by which learning can be established (Powell & Kalina, 2009; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Lave and Wenger (1991) have supported the notion that knowledge, understanding, significance, and meaning making are constructed through social interactions with others by declaring that "human minds develop in social situations" (p. 11). Consequently, collaboration and meaning making among early childhood professionals in higher education will result in them being better prepared to mentor and nurture future early childhood professionals to develop the skills necessary to support young children and their families.

Reflective group practice

The first call for action indicated in the literature is that early childhood professionals engage in reflective group practice. Bernacchio et al. (2007) describe reflective group practice as a learning community, a chance for professionals to “model equitable education in preparing professionals to work with children and adults” (p. 56). Additionally, reflective group practice can support educators in examining their beliefs, frames of reference, or assumptions that guide or influence their practice (Bernacchio et al., 2007; Cawsey et al., 2016; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Trust and dialogue are two components that are critical to the successful promotion of reflective group practice, and align with social constructivism (Cawsey et al., 2016; Raven, 2014; Schein, 1993).

Reflective group practice comes with challenges. Engagement in reflective group practice takes time, which is often constricted by bustling academic lives (Gray, 2007; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Raven, 2014; Webster-Wright, 2013). Paradoxically, Webster-Wright (2013) has suggested that taking the time to engage in reflective group practice can promote increased clarity and focus on problems that occupy faculty time. Raven (2014) cites multiple benefits to engaging in reflective group practice, including an increase in confidence in one’s role, enabling connections, and an enhanced ability to question practices and implications.

Communities of practice

The second call for action is that early childhood professionals participate in communities of practice. Communities of practice (CoPs) are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). In the educational context, Kerno and Mace (2010) describe a CoP as a group of people who share knowledge, insight, tools, and experience about an area of common interest with the goal of supporting student learning. CoPs are knowledge-based social structures; they can vary in size, formality, and purpose and include core and peripheral members (Wenger, 1998, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoPs innovate and solve problems, facilitate knowledge transfer, invent new practices, create new knowledge, define new territory, and develop a collective and strategic voice (Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoPs describe learning as an integral part of people’s daily lives, achieved through participation in communities and organizations; fundamentally, learning is a social phenomenon (Wenger, 1998).

Engaging in CoPs has many benefits. CoPs are based on collegial relationships among persons with a variety of skill sets and levels of mastery, which is supportive of interprofessional collaboration (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). Engagement in CoPs promotes changes in pedagogy and practice, resulting in educators who are better prepared to address students’ changing needs, leading to improved student outcomes and aligning with our ethical obligations as early childhood professionals in Ontario (CECE, 2017; Kabes et al., 2010; Shaffer, 2017; Timperley, 2011).

Policy

The third call for action is the development and enactment of provincial and territorial policy that requires collaboration among early childhood professionals: those working with children and families and those in higher education. The literature review indicated that Ontario is the only province/territory with a provincially/territorially sanctioned governing body that regulates early childhood educators in the public interest (CECE, 2024). The CECE’s (2017) *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* states that the early childhood professional’s responsibility is to “build positive relationships with colleagues by demonstrating respect, trust and integrity, [and to] ... support, mentor and collaborate with colleagues” (p. 7). Development and enactment of comparable expectations across provinces and territories will contribute to an increase in early childhood professionals working in higher education who

have an ethical obligation to collaborate to promote skills, knowledge, and pedagogical practices that will produce graduates of the highest quality. An impact of this change is that graduates will be better equipped to make the greatest possible difference in children's lives by supporting children and their families to attain equal outcomes and well-being (Sykes, 2014).

Conclusion

This literature review has limitations. The breadth of literature reviewed was limited to the last 10 years and focused solely on Canadian research. Only electronic sources were included, resulting in a representative yet limited review of published research.

As previously discussed, early childhood professionals in higher education have an ethical obligation to collaborate with one another to promote skills, knowledge, and pedagogical practices that will produce graduates of the highest quality. Collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education will result in them being better prepared to mentor and nurture future early childhood professionals to develop the skills necessary to support young children and their families.

This literature review explored various forms of collaboration, specifically interprofessional collaboration and collaboration for professional learning, and presented three calls for action, two are which are grounded in social constructivism, that will promote collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education: reflective group practice, communities of practice (CoPs) and the development and enactment of provincial and territorial policy that necessitate and support collaboration among early childhood professionals. This literature review stressed that changes in policy, particularly in relation to the hiring of sessional faculty, will assist in creating space that encourages faculty members to collaborate through, for example, CoPs or reflective group practice. Unifying the early childhood professional sector across provinces and territories through the development and enactment of comparable expectations might also contribute to an increase in early childhood professionals who have an ethical obligation to collaborate to promote skills, knowledge, and pedagogical practices that will produce graduates of the highest quality. This is particularly important in light of the federal *Toward \$10-a-Day: Early Learning and Child Care* initiative (Government of Canada, 2024). This initiative aims to create 250,000 new child care spaces across the country by March 2026 with the goal of giving every Canadian child the best possible start in life (Government of Canada, 2024).

As an early childhood professional in higher education in Ontario, I argue that supporting best outcomes for children and families requires a variety of skills, knowledge, and expertise that can be achieved only through professional collaboration. As an early childhood educator and educators' trainer, it is my hope that this literature review raises awareness among Canadian early childhood professionals in higher education in relation to some of the challenges they face collaborating with their peers, and that the benefits of collaboration and the calls for action presented motivate them to make changes in their pedagogical practice, resulting in an increase in interprofessional collaboration.

To conclude, I envision that this literature review will serve as research evidence and foster the development of further research focused on collaboration among early childhood professionals in higher education. Finally, I hope that this literature review inspires and fosters the development of further research focused on children's experiences as recipients of services provided by professional collaborations and as meaningful contributors to collaborations.

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