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Nursing and social work students working together to safeguard children – Using simulation to improve knowledge of the child protection system

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ABSTRACT

Child protection practice relates to activities undertaken to protect specific children who are suspected to be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, it is challenging and requires effective multiagency working. NHS England identifies safeguarding as embedded in the core duties and statutory responsibilities of all organisations across the NHS and health system. The consequence in failing to work effectively can be catastrophic and underpins this initiative to improve interprofessional practice. The team delivered an IPE event which brought together child nursing and social work students in a simulated Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) which was evaluated using a mixed methods design. Statistically significant findings were compelling, evidencing increases in knowledge and understanding of the child protection process and the roles and responsibilities of the interprofessional team. These findings were contextualised in the established four themes of the qualitative data. Our experience supports the continuing development and evaluation of interprofessional learning events underpinned by transformative learning approaches.

1. Format

This initiative was informed by the flipped classroom model¹ whereby students engaged in discipline-specific, direct instruction on the topic by means of a range of resources, which enabled the time together in the session to be devoted to application of knowledge and skill development. Social Work and Childrens Nursing students were then brought together on Blackboard Collaborate to engage in an online simulation of an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC).

2. Target audience

Thirty nine Year three Bachelor of Science (Honours) Children's Nursing students were offered this opportunity as an optional practice learning day and forty one Year one Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Social Work students engaged as part of their mandatory readiness for direct practice element.

3. Objectives

Lack of knowledge of roles has been identified as a barrier to effective joint working for child protection² and practitioners working with children and families are responsible for explaining thresholds and the process of child protection to families.³ The importance of students

developing their understanding of the child protection system in the UK led to the development of the following objectives:

- 1.) Explain the Initial Child Protection Conference purpose and process
- 2.) Explore the roles of professionals involved
- 3.) Reflect on the experience

4. Activity description

The initiative itself is underpinned by principles of transformative learning⁴ which values experiential learning and was informed by Morris⁵ study, which advocated the provision of “contextually rich learning environments that represent in the present moment, uncontrived, “hands on”, real world primary concrete experiences” (p1071). A detailed child protection case scenario was developed that would justify the involvement of a health visitor and school nurse and would involve a structured Initial Child Protection Conference.

Educators recognised the importance of facilitating the process by assisting students to be open to a novel experience which may feel risky.⁶ As suggested by Stember⁷ the preparation stage is important in enabling an exploration by all students of what their discipline can offer to the situation. Creating a psychologically safe learning environment also needed to be prioritised.^{8,9} Students were orientated to the purpose

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of Interprofessional Learning, and a briefing document was drafted for them, stressing that the activity was not assessed but was a learning experience to reflect on.

The integration of discipline specific preparation alongside inter-professional experiential learning was underpinned by CAIPE's value of sustaining the identity and expertise of each profession whilst improving interprofessional practice.¹⁰ Resources were developed collaboratively by the academics involved but were used in different ways depending on the unique needs of each set of students. All students:

- Engaged in role play with a standardised patient.
- Learned about the family and the case as it evolved over time via completed assessment and chronology.
- Learned about the roles of those involved in the case.
- Read the various guidance and processes relevant to child protection locally and nationally.
- Watched an example ICPC.

Following this preparation, child nursing and social work students came together in a 1 h simulated Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) in groups of 6/7. Students were allocated to the various roles involved in the ICPC (chair, mother, maternal grandmother, social worker, school nurse, health visitor) and given some role information as a guide to taking on their role in the simulation. Students were allocated to roles they might have in practice; child nursing students took the roles of health visitor and school nurse and social work students the ICPC chair and social worker. The remaining roles were those of the mother and maternal grandmother and were shared amongst the remaining students. This peer simulation approach has the potential for developing student empathy for those subject to child protection procedures.¹¹

Group facilitation is a key facet of the social work role, and some writers have suggested this leaves them best placed to take a lead role in facilitating interdisciplinary groups (Pullen- Sansfacon & Ward, 2012). As such, social work students had the additional opportunity to practice group facilitation skills in a safe environment, seeking to manage the group process to achieve the defined outcome of the ICPC.

The simulated ICPC itself took place online and the rationale for this was both pragmatism and realism, recognising that since Covid 19 many multidisciplinary meetings are now held wholly or partially online. This learning experience also therefore develops students' Digital Literacy – a term coined by Health Education England¹² meaning the capabilities that fit us for living, learning, working, participating, and thriving in a digital society. Seeking to develop the competence of staff working in the health and care workforce is seen as not just about technical skills but also about a positive attitude towards digital technology. No teaching staff participated in the simulation itself as educators have previously found their presence has inhibited students and there is evidence of this in the literature.¹³

Following the simulated meeting students were debriefed in their discipline groups. This was important to ensure that students felt safe to reflect on their experiences and that reflections were focused on their own professional role, standards and values. Social Work England¹⁴ specifically outlines the need for social workers to “hold on to” their professional identity when working in interprofessional spheres.

5. Assessment

The first two objectives were assessed through an online survey. Ethical approval was granted by the College of Health, Life and Environmental Sciences from the University of Worcester. This mixed methods study gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. The pre-test post-test design was in accordance with principles of quasi-experimental design¹⁵ and sought to establish the causal effect of this educational intervention on students' knowledge.¹⁶ The students were asked to undertake the evaluation by means of Likert scores on their perceived knowledge immediately before the initiative and after their

debrief opportunity, thus reducing the impact of outside variables on the results.¹⁵ Students were also asked to complete additional qualitative questions, with the aim of capturing rich data about their experiences, learning and attitudes.¹⁷

6. Quantitative evaluation

Forty one students completed the pre-simulation questionnaire and thirty five the post-simulation questionnaire, a 51 % and 44 % response rate respectively. Students were asked to rate their knowledge and understanding of the Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) process as well as their knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different professionals involved in the ICPC, pre and post simulation (see Figs. 1 and 2).

As a relatively low response rate was returned from the participants, the researchers exercise caution in analysing the results. Burkell¹⁸ suggests that for data to be generalizable, it is widely accepted that a response rate of 75 % is required. However, as the purpose of this exercise was to test the outcomes of this simulation, with the aim of developing it further for future iterations and ensuring the experiential learning was transformative as per Mezirow's⁴ theory, there is no need, at this point, to generalise amongst the wider student population.

Considering the data; there was a clear shift in the knowledge and understanding of both the ICPC process and the roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved following this experiential learning.

The mean of 2.7 pre-simulation, increased to 4.2 post-simulation for knowledge and understanding of the ICPC process. Knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved in an ICPC rose from a mean of 2.9 pre-simulation to 4.5 post-simulation.

The students scored the post simulation debrief a mean of 4.6 (on a scale of 0–5) for its usefulness in reflection on practice.

The *t*-test was chosen for the statistical analysis of pre and post experiential learning scores for several reasons. It allows researchers to compare two sets of data to look for statistical difference, the *t*-test allows for small sample sizes and can also compare data sets of different sizes – All of these factors apply to the pre and post sim responses.¹⁹

t-test results of pre/post simulation data in the knowledge and understanding of the ICPC process yielded a *P* value of less than 0.0001 with a confidence interval of 95 %. The mean of pre-sim minus post-sim equals –1.53. The difference is ‘*extremely statistically significant*’.²⁰

t-test results of pre/post simulation data in the knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of professionals involved in ICPC yielded a *P* value of less than 0.0001 with a confidence interval of 95 %. The mean of pre-sim minus post sim equals –1.63. The difference is also ‘*extremely statistically significant*’.²⁰

These results clearly demonstrate transformative learning, the original aim of the simulation. While this is extremely gratifying for the

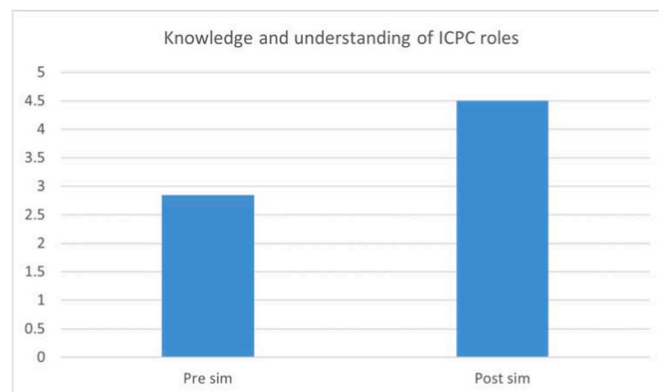


Fig. 1. Knowledge and understanding of ICPC roles.

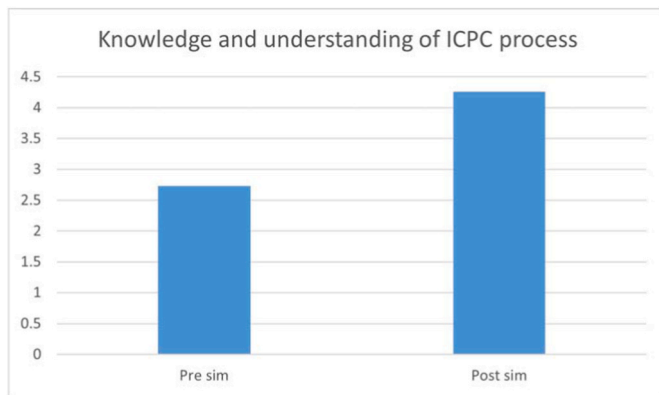


Fig. 2. Knowledge and understanding of ICPC process.

researchers, Denscombe¹⁹ claims that a sample size should be greater than 30 for any confidence in its statistical analysis. Although the research sample size exceeds this, it does so marginally. It is the intention of the authors therefore that future data generation will add to the data set. In time, data will have greater generalizability and statistical analysis could be even more compelling in the support of experiential learning causing a shift in our student's knowledge and attitudes within the realms of child protection.

7. Qualitative evaluation

In the post simulation online questionnaire students were asked to provide comments regarding their reflections of the initiative. Reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data was carried out by all three researchers independently.²¹ Key themes were highlighted and cross referenced, and the data revisited until the final four themes were agreed. It is worthy of highlighting that the researchers were well aligned throughout the process, differences in interpretation were few and quickly and easily discussed and resolved.

Four final themes were generated.

8. “Everyone has a different focus ...”: understanding the professional roles of others

Developing an understanding of the roles of those involved in an ICPC and the significance of these roles in making effective decisions was a substantial theme in the qualitative comments. The initiative enabled students to appreciate that despite everyone having the same goal, the various members of the ICPC had differing perspectives of the situation, which needed to be managed, as articulated by one respondent “*everyone has a different focus but ultimately the same goal so it can be hard to bring it all together*”. If managed effectively it was recognised that the ICPC could contribute to effective safeguarding practice.

9. “A complicated process”: process and complexities of an ICPC

Students identified that they had developed their awareness of the detailed nature of the child protection process and recognised the complexity of the ICPC meeting itself because of this interdisciplinary experiential learning opportunity. As one respondent stated “*I understand more about how the meeting works and my role*”

10. “Conducting myself professionally”: teamwork and experience of working within the MDT

This theme highlighted learning about the importance and value of information sharing to safeguard children, building on the increased recognition of different professionals bringing both different

information and perspectives to the meeting. How to contribute professionally and work effectively as a multi-disciplinary team was identified as key learning for effective safeguarding. One student reflected that ‘*It is imperative to work as a team with all the other professionals involved to come to the best outcome for the child*’. Another highlighted the importance of advocating for the child, ensuring ‘*their voice is heard and not lost*’ within a multi-disciplinary meeting.

11. “Asking the right questions”: application to practice

When students considered their learning, they often were considering what this meant in terms of their own practice, with one student reflecting on the need to “*ask the right questions*”, another identifying “*how hard it can be talking with parents present*” and a third recognising that they needed “*to try and be less judgemental on certain situations*”. In addition, several students commented on the application of practice guidance and documentation, for example the application of the local threshold guidance and Early Help Assessment.

12. Impact

The quantitative data shows that students perceived an increase in knowledge of both the ICPC process and the role of those involved through their involvement in the IPE delivered. Whilst the researchers recognise the limitations in making bold claims about the initiative leading to increases in knowledge, it provides an evaluation of the event which can be built on in future studies.

The qualitative comments suggest that students developed their knowledge of key aspects of practice in child protection. Whilst reviewing the themes, the importance of developing an understanding of the roles involved is suggested to be one of the benefits of interprofessional education. Experiential learning is widely seen as being an effective approach in relation to interprofessional learning²² and has been shown to enable students to gain greater insight into the roles and responsibilities of other disciplines.^{23,24} It is also said to enable the development of boundary-crossing skills²⁵ whereby professionals can synthesize knowledge across disciplines, manage complex cases and be open to alternative hypotheses. Research data has shown that experiential learning with this simulated ICPC forum allows students to consider their individual roles in relation to child protection and to practice working interprofessionally. Such an opportunity has allowed them to start to develop the confidence and competence required to effectively safeguard children, a vital skill for their professional lives.

13. Required materials

Preliminary learning materials:

National practice guidance and specifically the section on ICPCs (p93-95) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669e7501ab418ab055592a7b/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023.pdf.

Local practice guidance:

https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-09/Levels_of_need_guidance_September_2021/20/281/29.pdf.

Fictionalised ICPC:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Q11zm-L-hQ>.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jenny Dale: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Susan Poultnery:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Alison Lewis:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Reports a relationship with that includes: Has patent pending to. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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