

Inter Professional Education (IPE) and Team Based Practice in Africa: The Missing Link

Godwin N. Aja highlights the need to broaden and diversify the operational definition and application of IPE to emphasize collaboration and teamwork beyond the clinical setting.

Introduction

Interprofessional education (IPE) is a unique model of educating students for careers in the health sector, where collaboration and teamwork are critical skills required to maximally address the health needs of society. However, it seems that the words, "collaboration" and "teamwork" in the IPE concept is often preferentially (mis) applied, to suggest collaboration and teamwork with mostly professionals within the clinical/institutional setting and does not usually include other "professionals" associated with the health system. The health sector is complex, diverse and encompasses other professionals. This paper highlights the need to broaden and diversify the operational definition and application of IPE to emphasize collaboration and teamwork with extra-professionals, super-professionals and the supra-professional to optimally and holistically address the health needs of the community to ensure universal health coverage.

Generally, the health care system is made up of an array of health professionals working together to improve health and wellbeing. Some health professionals work with colleagues in the same disciplinary field (intra-professionals) and others work with professionals outside their professional boundaries (inter-professionals). For example, in intra-professional education, students in the same health professional discipline learn to work together, usually in the educational, institutional or health care settings. An example is when a family/community medicine student works together with a colleague(s) in family/community medicine (the same discipline) to solve a problem(s) related to their specialty. Similarly, the student in internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, etc, can work intra-professionally (within their disciplinary team) to learn and/or address health needs. On the other hand, interprofessional education may involve students from different specialties/fields working with other students outside their specialty area to address a health problem of common interest. For example, inter-professional education occurs when a family/community medicine student work together with students in internal medicine or obstetrics and gynecology, public health, radiology, etc, (across disciplinary teams) to address health needs.

Interprofessional education tends to lean towards collaboration across disciplinary teams within the healthcare subsystem, rather than with other professionals in the larger health system. The health system is bigger, more complex and sophisticated, and requires diverse professionals. When viewed with the health system lens, interprofessional education of students can be broadened to include collaboration and teamwork with the other "professionals" engaged with the health system. These "other" professionals, in their own rights, are the extra-professionals (citizens/people/consumers/communities/patients, NGOs, CBOs, FBOs), super-professionals (government/policy makers), and the supra-professional (God).

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Interprofessional education in the era of the humongous Africa's health challenges

The achievement of universal health coverage may depend on health professionals working with other professionals outside the conventional academic disciplinary groups to address the increasing burden of disease in Africa. It has been reported that six countries in Africa (South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zambia, Tanzania, and Uganda) are among nine countries with the highest estimated share of worldwide new HIV infections in 2020⁽¹⁾; the WHO African region remains one of the hardest hit areas with 96% of all malaria death and 95% of all malaria cases⁽²⁾; Africa continues to carry the highest burden of malaria globally⁽³⁾; less than 20% of population in Africa did not have at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose as at end of February 2022⁽⁴⁾; and average life expectancy at birth for those born in 2021 is about 63 years and may be worse by the time the population of Africa doubles in the coming years.⁽⁵⁾ Sadly, there is imbalance in the delivery of curative and preventive services, skewed investment in human resources for health, dysfunctional governance structure/leadership, limited financial resources for health, uncoordinated dissemination of health information and neglect in the development of African traditional medicines.

Interprofessional education of students has been tested and practiced in developing and developed countries. It is a key strategic approach aimed at preparing well equipped health professionals to confront the numerous global health challenges, particularly in Africa, where the highest burden of disease exists. Interprofessional learning takes place when students learn concurrently to solve a particular issue within the framework of their own profession. van Diggele et al⁽⁶⁾ defines interprofessional education (IPE) as, "a critical approach for preparing students to enter the health workforce, where teamwork and collaboration are important competencies." Buring et al⁽⁷⁾ considers IPE as, "an important pedagogical approach for preparing health professions students to provide patient care in a collaborative team environment. Interprofessional-education (IPE) refers to "occasions when two or more professions learn from and about each other to improve collaboration and the quality of care."⁽⁸⁾ Effective collaboration and teamwork require being aware of other healthcare professionals and their contributions to patient care, as well as knowledge of each other's roles, good communication and negotiation skills, a willingness to work together, trust related to one's own competence and competence in one's abilities.⁽⁹⁾ Thus, "an integrated approach to addressing disease program outcomes, health systems and determinants of health,"⁽¹⁰⁾ is desirable in the interprofessional education of students.

The health system is bigger than the healthcare subsystem. Therefore, interprofessional education should not only be about the professionals in the field of medicine or nursing or medical laboratory science but also other professionals involved in "addressing the priority health concerns of the community, region, and/or nation they have a mandate to serve."⁽¹¹⁾ Collaboration and teamwork with extra-professionals, super-professionals and the supra-professional are key to addressing human health needs at both the institutional, clinical and community levels.

Extra-professional collaboration and teamwork in interprofessional education

Interprofessional education can be a unique model of educating students for careers in the health sector, where collaboration and teamwork with extra-professionals (citizens/people/consumers/communities/patients, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organization (FBOs)) are critical skills required by students to maximally address the health needs of society. Collaborating with the citizens/people/consumers/communities/patients provides an avenue to listen to their values and perspectives regarding the quantity and quality of care, while collaborating with NGOs, CBOs and FBOs may reveal incredible community resources for addressing numerous health concerns.

Super-professional collaboration and teamwork in interprofessional education

The super-professionals (government and policy makers) play important roles in the advancement of health by improving the way the health system works, paying particular attention to governance, funding, and providing services in order to safeguard government's social role in health improvement. This is particularly so in Africa. The policy makers strive to create trustworthy and thorough evidence that supports the numerous and complex essential decisions regarding how to arrange the various components of the health system and bring about desired improvements. Therefore, interprofessional education can be a unique model of educating students for careers in the health sector, where collaboration and teamwork with the super-professionals are critical skills required by students to maximally address the health needs of society.

Supra-professional collaboration and teamwork in interprofessional education

There are tons of scientific evidence on the role of spirituality in health care.^(12,13,14) Hence, interprofessional education of students for careers in the health sector requires collaboration and teamwork with God (or the transcendent, as some people may prefer), via spiritual care professionals in the healthcare or community settings, in order to fully address society's health demands.

No one professional is an island

The concept of interprofessional education seems to revolve around the popular maxim that, "no one professional is an island." Interprofessional education of current and future health professionals is germane. No health professional should feel that his/her contribution to the health cure or care services is more important than that of others. A robust interprofessional education of students calls for African health professionals and institutions to partner with each other (south-south collaboration) to promote the intra-professional, extra-professional, super-professional and supra-professional collaborative experiences of health professions students to create better future health for Africans. The great thing about south-south collaboration among African health professionals and institutions is that it allows for equal access to information, training, funding, conferences, publishing opportunities, thereby promoting interdependence, sustainability, manpower retention and in general horizontal relationships. African-based health professionals and institutions can also partner with others in Europe and North America (north-south collaboration) to enrich the experiences of students through intra-professional, extra-professional, super-professional and supra-professional engagements.

Conclusion

There is a missing link in the definition and operationalization of the concept of interprofessional education. The health sector is complex, diverse and encompasses other professionals, thus, requiring health professionals to work together with other stakeholders (particularly communities and policy makers) to effectively and efficiently provide need-based health to Africans. Therefore, African health professionals, working collaboratively, can contribute to (re)building better health systems to address the current, emerging, and re-emerging challenges that have bedeviled Africa. There is the need to broaden and diversify the operational definition and application of interprofessional education of students to emphasize collaboration and teamwork with extra-professionals, super-professionals and the supra-professional to optimally and holistically address the health needs of the community and to ensure universal health coverage.

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