LEARNING PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL PRACTICE: THE SPEECH PATHOLOGY EXPERIENCE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT…….. xi

DECLARATION……xiii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…….xiv

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION……..1

1.1 What is professional ethical practice?.....1

1.2 Why is competence in the area of professional ethical practice important?.....3

1.3 What do we know about professional ethical practice and speech pathology?6

1.4 What do we know about the teaching and learning of ethical practice?.....7

1.5 Why is this research project necessary?.....8

1.6 Conclusion……..9

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW……10

2.1 Introduction……10

2.1.1 A story from clinical practice……..10

2.1.2 Introduction to the literature review……11

2.2 What do we want health professionals to learn about professional ethical practice?.....12

2.2.1 What is professional ethical practice?.....12

2.2.2 Key curriculum goals in the area of professional ethical practice……12

2.2.3 The need to explicitly teach professional ethical practice……24

2.3 How does the literature inform our understanding of the teaching and learning of professional ethical practice?.....26

2.3.1 Three considerations when considering teaching and learning in professional ethical practice……26

2.3.2 Learning readiness approaches to understanding learning……27

2.3.3 A teaching approaches' view to understanding student learning of professional ethical practice……34

2.3.4 Assessment of professional ethical practice……53

2.4 Formulation of the question……57

2.4.1 Statement of the research questions……58

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH PROCESS…… 59

3.1 Theoretical underpinnings for the research process……..59

3.2 Deciding on the research approach……60

3.2.1 Dealing with bias……60

3.2.2 My Background……61

3.2.3 Formulation of the research design……63

3.3 Study Design……..66

3.3.1 Ensuring credibility and quality ……66

3.3.2 Justification of the methodology……67

3.4 Method……..70

3.4.1 Population sampling……70

3.4.2 Choice of data collection methods……74

3.4.3 Analysis methodology……86

3.4.4 Ensuring rigour……94

3.5 Procedure……96

3.5.1 Participant sample……96

3.5.2 Ethical considerations……96

3.5.3 Data collection……98

3.5.4 Data analysis……104

3.6 Limitations of the research method……106

3.7 Summary of the research process……107

CHAPTER 4 STUDENT READINESS FOR LEARNING PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL PRACTICE……108

4.1 Introduction to the chapter……108

4.2 Introduction to the student participants……109

4.2.1 All student participants……109

4.2.2 Introduction to core group students……110

4.2.3 Conclusion……115

4.3 An exploration of the role of learning readiness factors in student learning of professional ethical practice……115

4.3.1 Review of key concepts in the literature……115

4.3.2 The Defining Issues Test……118

4.3.3 Discussion of the DIT results……120

4.3.4 Emotional Engagement……130

4.3.5 Summary of the key implications of the results……140

CHAPTER 5 EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT LEARNING IN PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL PRACTICE……141

5.1 Introduction……141

5.2 Student competency in professional ethical practice……141

5.2.1 Review of key concepts in the literature……141

5.2.2 Key curriculum inputs……142

5.2.3 Student mastery of professional ethical practice……146

5.3 Students' own descriptions of personal and professional influences on their learning of professional ethical practice……163

5.4 Summary……..172

CHAPTER 6 EDUCATOR PARTICIPANTS…… 174

6.1 Introduction……..174

6.1.1 Introduction to the chapter……..174

6.1.2 Ethical practice as a foundation competency for graduating speech pathology students……..175

6.2 Academic Educator Participants……176

6.2.1 Introduction to the academic educator participants……176

6.2.2 Teaching ethical knowledge base……177

6.2.3 Teaching ethical practice skills……179

6.2.4 Teaching ethical attitudes……180

6.2.5 Role of assessment……181

6.2.6 Teaching strategies employed……185

6.3 Field Educator Participants……187

6.3.1 Introduction to the field educator participants……188

6.3.2 Ethical teaching moments during the practicum……194

6.3.3 Field educators' assessment of the students' resources……196

6.3.4 Teaching strategies used by field educators……198

6.3.5 What do educators say about learning professional ethical practice?……200

6.3.6 Conclusions……203

CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS……206

7.1 Introduction……..206

7.2 Thesis summary……206

7.2.1 How the literature provides insights into the teaching and learning principles related to ethical practice……207

7.2.2 Understanding the research process……208

7.2.3 Factors influencing student readiness to learn ethical practice……208

7.2.4 Effectiveness of student learning……208

7.2.5 Educator's contributions to student learning……210

7.3 Conclusion……211

7.4 Implications and solutions……212

APPENDICES……215

REFERENCES……237

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Key Curriculum Goals in Ethical Practice…….13

Table 2 Kohlberg's six stages of moral reasoning development……30

Table 3. Adult Learning Behaviours……...36

Table 4 Guide for student consideration of ethical dimensions of clinical Reasoning……46

Table 5 Criteria for classifying student responses in relation to the provision of clinical information……78

Table 6 Criteria for classifying student responses in relation to the recognition and prioritisation of ethical dilemmas……79

Table 7 Criteria for classifying student responses in relation to communication processes...…….79

Table 8 Criteria for classifying student responses in relation to the provision of management plans…….80

Table 9 Summary of data sources……..…86

Table 10 Summary of the narrative analysis framework……92

Table 11 Moral judgement stage used by students on the DIT……..119

Table 12 Students' ability to recognise and identify relevant clinical information……..148

Table 13 Evidence of **s**tudents' ability to recognise and prioritise ethical issues……150

Table 14 Students' use of communication and teamwork skills……...158

Table 15 Evidence of students' ability to provide a management plan……160

Table 16 Attitudes and values discussed by the core group of students as being important to ethical practice……..161

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Focus group questioning strategy……71

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Defining Issues Test Sample Questions……...……213

Appendix 2a Written Case Discussion…….....216

Appendix 2b Guided Case Discussion……..217

Appendix 2c Scoring Guide for Case Discussion……..…218

Appendix 2d Scoring Guide for Written Case Discussion……...221

Appendix 3 Group Dilemma Discussion…….223

Appendix 4 Influences on ethical development

Focus Group Discussion Guide……...224

Appendix 5 Influence of process on ethical decision making

Student Interview Guide…..…….225

Appendix 6 Academic Educators Interview Guide……..226

Appendix 7 Field Educators Interview Guide……..227

Appendix 8a Student volunteer information sheet……...228

Appendix 8b Educator volunteer information sheet…….230

Appendix 9a Consent to participate in research (Student Form)……..231

Appendix 9b Consent to participate in research (Academic Educator Form)232

Appendix 9c Consent to participate in research (Field Educator Form)……..233

Appendix 10 Narrative Analysis Framework……...234

Appendix 11 Distribution of student scores on the DIT……..235

Appendix 12 Examples of Atlas TI. Student codes……..236

ABSTRACT

An ethics curriculum is an integral part of most health profession courses. This thesis will explore using a qualitative approach to investigate the learning and application of professional ethical practice by Flinders University speech pathology students. This work will identify factors that may influence students' readiness to learn about ethics. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that underpin professional ethical practice which speech pathology students were able to demonstrate at the conclusion of their entry level course will be illustrated. Also described will be the factors, identified by students and academics and field educators, which may influence student learning of this complex area of practice.

To explore this topic, the results of "The Defining Issues Test" (Rest, 1979b) of moral judgement development, independent and scaffolded case studies, as well as group and individual interviews with students, and individual interviews with academic and field educators have been used.

Results from this study suggest that a significant number of the undergraduate speech pathology students involved in this study found learning and applying ethical principles difficult, as their ability to reason morally remained conventional and rule bound. At the point of graduation, the students applied clinical and ethical reasoning skills, whilst emerging, were not yet well developed. The ability of students to demonstrate the integration of ethical theory and practice appeared limited. This lack of integration may be influenced by the fact that few field educators could report being exposed to formal ethical theories and ethical reasoning approaches during their own undergraduate education. Some of the more generic ethical practice skills reported by academics as being embedded throughout the speech pathology course,

such as communication, team work and the seeking of professional support, were more clearly demonstrated by students.

Results of this study suggest that exiting students and newly graduated speech pathologists require ongoing support in the area of professional ethical practice. More explicit embedding of the theoretical underpinnings of the ethics knowledge base throughout the curriculum may be required. To be able to support the integration of professional ethical practice in students and new graduates, speech pathologists currently practising in the field who did not receive formal ethics education during their own degree or since, may require ongoing professional development in the formal knowledge base pertaining to professional ethical practice.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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