



Participatory action research: Involving students in parent education



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ABSTRACT

Competition for scarce clinical placements has increased requiring new and innovative models to be developed to meet the growing need. A participatory action research project was used to provide a community nursing clinical experience of involvement in parent education. Nine Hong Kong nursing students self-selected to participate in the project to implement a parenting program called Parenting Young Children in a Digital World. Three project cycles were used: needs identification, skills development and program implementation. Students were fully involved in each cycle's planning, action and reflection phase. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected to inform the project. The overall outcome of the project was the provision of a rich and viable clinical placement experience that created significant learning opportunities for the students and researchers. This paper will explore the student's participation in this PAR project as an innovative clinical practice opportunity.

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Introduction

An issue of concern for many countries is the shortage of clinical placements for undergraduate nursing students (Hall, 2006; Smith et al., 2010). Competition for scarce clinical placements can be fierce (Setter Kline and Hodges, 2006) and as an outcome of this scarcity, the quality of clinical placements can be placed at risk (Hutchings et al., 2005). While these shortages provide multiple challenges, they also provide new opportunities (Hall, 2006).

Hong Kong Kindergarten Schools provided the setting for a parent education participatory action research project (PAR) that formed the foundation for an innovative clinical experience. The overall aim of the project was to provide a work-based community parent education experience for third year nursing students. Using a PAR approach enabled the inclusion of third year nursing students to provide a "real world" experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of community parent education. Health promotion and early intervention approaches were used to focus on parents with preschool children attending two Hong Kong kindergartens. This paper will explore the student's participation in this PAR project as an innovative clinical practice opportunity.

Background

Clinical placements regardless of the setting require not only an authentic nursing experience for students, but critically, to enable students to integrate, demonstrate and extend their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Yet clinical placements are not always ideal learning situations. Registered nurses even when providing student supervision are required to manage multiple and often unexpected demands of caring for patients, coupled with the need to manage significant workloads (Grealish and Revitte, 2005; Andrews et al., 2006). This can be compounded by students feeling unsupported and allocated to clinical placements that have inconsistent work practices with those taught within their nursing degree (Grealish and Revitte, 2005).

Creating new clinical placement opportunities will be dependent on the capacity of nurses to shift their perceptions about nursing practice. A shift from a predominately active hands-on clinical role in a hospital to a community educative role will bring opportunities as well as challenges. In many types of community nursing practice a "hands-off" approach is used where the nurse acts as an educator or facilitator of learning and community development. In this role the nurse frequently works in partnership and co-produces knowledge with community members (Fowler et al., 2012). A key nursing focus is building individual and community capacity (Adrian, 2009). For example, in Hong Kong school nurses assist in developing and implementing school health promotion activities (Lee, 2011); or in Australia, child and family health nurses work with parents who, in most instances, have well infants and young children (NSW Health, 2011).

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Community placements provide an opportunity to expand the students' understanding of nursing practice (Reimer Kirkham et al., 2005) beyond hospital-based work. Community nursing provides a range of student clinical opportunities that have not been exploited. Nevertheless, Reimer Kirkham et al. (2005) raise the important issue of ensuring a strong relationship with community partners. If a strong and enduring relationship is established within the community, new opportunities to expand and further enrich students' clinical experiences will develop over time.

These new opportunities often require students and researchers to alter their vision about the scope of nursing practice. In some instances it requires students to be less passive and more engaged in their clinical placements (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). Although there is much to consider when arranging clinical placements they remain crucial to students' learning (Murray and Williamson, 2009).

Significantly clinical placements are not only focused on the development of clinical competence but clinical preparedness, organisational ability and student confidence (Edwards et al., 2004). Clinical placements are about involving students in work-based learning. The resulting placement outcomes are frequently dependent on the learning relationship that is developed (Gilmour et al., 2012; Andrews et al., 2006). Parent education combined with a PAR approach provides such an opportunity to involve students in a range of clinical knowledge and skills development.

The participatory action research (PAR) project

The PAR project aimed to enable students to gain clinical experience in health promotion through the provision of a parent education program. Reason and Bradbury (2008) identify a PAR approach as seeking to create a learning environment that connects theory and practice with action and reflection as an outcome of participating with others. These abilities are essential for nurses. PAR supports the pursuit of practical solutions to resolve concerns or problems allowing an improvement within the community (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). Crucially PAR conducts research with participants not on them (Baldwin, 2012).

For a PAR project to be successful, Minkler (2000) identified the following project requirements: it is participatory; a joint process occurs that engages community members enabling an equal contribution; there is a co-learning process; systems development and capacity building occurs; and participants are enabled to increase control over their lives by nurturing participant strengths and problem-solving abilities. Finally, there is a balance between research and action (Minkler, 2000). As in action research there are fluid and overlapping cycles. During all stages of the PAR there is collection and analysis of data, and reflection and knowledge generation (Somekh, 2008).

A PAR approach was chosen due to opportunities for student involvement within program development, implementation and review stages. Engaging in a PAR project enables students to share responsibility for all aspects of the project, not just the clinical task. In this project the clinical task was the 2 hours of workshop facilitation. A sharing of power to make decisions occurred between the students and researchers (Kesby et al., 2007; Stringer, 2007). In addition to providing an experience of assisting in a research project strongly linked to clinical nursing practice and integrating research evidence into nursing practice. Thiollent (2011) identified this type of approach to teaching and learning as promoting an information and knowledge sharing culture. The ability of nurses to embrace this culture is a crucial component of nursing practice.

The focus of this PAR was a newly developed program called: Parenting Young Children in a Digital World. An early intervention approach was taken by developing a 2-hour interactive program for

parents of preschool children. The program aim was to facilitate parenting skills to manage young children's digital technology use as an asset for health, learning and enjoyment. A developmental approach was used with a focus on early brain development, and the opportunities this knowledge provides parents to enhancing their parenting and the health and wellbeing of their preschool children.

The rationale for developing this parent education program was the identification that parents with school-aged children are experiencing a range of different parenting challenges than previous generations. Parents are now contending with the opportunities and difficulties resulting from their children's exposure to rapidly changing and engaging digital technologies and activities. While health studies are identifying significant risks from over exposure to digital technologies (including television) and the often violent content that is made available to, at times, very young children (Garvis and Pendergast, 2011; Anderson et al., 2008; Ko et al., 2005).

The desired outcome was to help parents manage their young children's use of digital devices and develop developmental appropriate behaviour patterns. This program reinforced the importance of ensuring young children had exposure to a range of experiences that included outdoor physical activities, reading, drawing and regular interaction with other children.

Study design

The overall aim of this project was to provide a community clinical experience for third year students through the implementation of a parent education program. A PAR approach was used to enable the inclusion of students in the implementation of the program for parents with preschoolers attending two Hong Kong kindergartens. The project was conducted over a four-month period in 2012. This paper will report on the PAR and the student involvement. The findings from the evaluation of the parenting program will be reported elsewhere.

Ethics

Two university Human Research Ethics Committees provided approval for this project. All participants (students and parents) received a research information sheet and provided signed consent prior to the project commencement. All data were de-identified to maintain participant confidentiality.

Data collection

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at all stages during this project. These data included student questionnaires, group discussions, group observation and field notes. The student questionnaire asked for demographic data and their use of digital technologies. Due to the small participant numbers and descriptive nature of the data, these were collated manually.

The focus of the semi-structured questions elicited the students' experiences and reflections about participating in the PAR project included the skills and knowledge gained, experience of working in teams, changes to the program they made, challenges and rewards of participating, and the value they identified for future students. The digital recordings were transcribed and de-identified.

Data analysis

Template analysis guided the qualitative content analysis. Template analysis requires an a-priori template to be developed (King, 1998). This template is not fixed, and can be changed or

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