



Action research

Sally Dampier examines the ways in which action research can develop practice-based knowledge

When I was asked to write a commentary for this edition of *Nurse Researcher* focusing on action research, I was curious about recent articles on the method and searched through the journal. To my delight, there were 50 articles, book reviews and commentaries cited, highlighting the growing awareness and value of the role that action research plays in linking theory to our everyday practice. This edition of *Nurse Researcher* will add to the growing use of this method, with articles on action research from around the world. Each paper illustrates a variety of ways in which action research can support practice-based knowledge.

Action research has been described broadly as research in the clinical setting that involves the clinical area to bring about changes through an action-reflection cycle. Koch and Kralik (2008) describe action research as based on democratic, equitable, liberating and life enhancing principles in relation to a research process and is put into practice in cycles of look, think and act.

The three themed articles in this issue explore action research using different approaches that include action and reflection and give us insight into how this method can be used to further nursing practice. In the first article, by Gallagher *et al*, a study of 'partnership for healthy living' sought to develop and evaluate an advanced practice nurse case-management programme using participatory action research. The aim of the study was to develop, implement and evaluate the impact of the programme on a senior citizens' community centre as a form of community support. The research team engaged stakeholders from the town's political leaders and community centre managers to gain support for the project. Collaboration between the researchers and participants in all areas of the design and implementation, from problem identification to evaluation, empowered the participants. Gallagher *et al* argue that participant reflection is a key aspect of participatory action research, leading to greater awareness of the problem and action for interventions.

In the second paper, Lee explores the outcomes of group reflections in an action research study to evaluate a nurse-led unit. The philosophy of action research was evident during development and implementation of the study. Workshops were held throughout the process to explore the team members' experiences, discuss key elements of the study, explore research methods, share ownership of data collection and analysis, and enhance the dissemination of the findings. Lee argues that in essence the research processes evolved from the team and were not predetermined. Not only did action research underpin the evaluation of the group reflection, it was also a good mechanism for reviewing the quality of the research. Lee's analysis of the group reflection explains the process of action research and shows how the emerging themes shaped the evaluation of the nurse-led unit.

The group reflection proved to be a valuable component of the study. Strength of the project were open communication and collaboration, which enabled group reflection to be effective and transferable into practice.

The final article by Porter *et al* discusses the methodological challenges in intervention studies of substance-abusing mothers. The authors share lessons learned from an infant massage-parenting intervention programme. By using an action-reflection cycle, they were able to make several modifications to the experimental protocol to maximise the recruitment and retention of their culturally diverse sample, while maintaining the rigour of their randomised controlled experiment design. Historically, this group has had high attrition levels, but by using this method the researchers were able to achieve participant retention rates of over 70 per cent.

During the study, the research team was also faced with issues dealing with cross-group contamination, variability in the programme delivery and disruption of the programme from a natural disaster. They explain that the flexibility of the research method enabled them to work with a population of substance-abusing women that was difficult to access. The authors hope the outcome of the study will promote evidence-based practice in addiction treatment, which is a strong testament to the ongoing effort of the research team to create a welcome and supportive environment for these women.

The articles in this issue provide an interesting account of the various ways in which action research can be used to advance nursing practice. In reading the articles, you will be encouraged to see action research as a method with clear relevance to clinical practice that engages nurses and stakeholders in the research process. Although some argue it has flaws – Jinks (2007) for example – as we continue in our search for evidence-informed and best practice, action research provides a link between theory and everyday nursing practice.

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