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How do I encourage Physiotherapy students to bridge potential theory-practice gaps through action research?

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Background

Background to the Topic The focus of this enquiry is how action research can be incorporated into Physiotherapy undergraduate curricula to enable students to bridge theory-practice gaps in their own professional education. The situation is that the practical knowledge gained through placement settings is often not valued within academic settings. Although Physiotherapy education prepares students to engage with research, as communicated by The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) (2002: 19) that 'Physiotherapy is science-based, committed to extending, applying, evaluating and reviewing the evidence that underpins and informs its practice and delivery', normative assumptions remain largely that Physiotherapy research is quantitative in nature. The CSP also commit to 'physical approaches to promote, maintain and restore physical, psychological and social well-being' (p. 20). To realise the values underpinning this policy directive necessitates a shift in the epistemological base of the profession and the development of new forms of relational epistemologies. This gives a policy and conceptual framing to my research. My response is to develop action research approaches. This is problematic, because, given the strength of the established epistemology, other modes of enquiry tend to be seen as inferior. This situation is viewed by many, including Johnson and Waterfield (2006), as potentially detrimental to sustainability in the profession, especially within a new order in which the CSP values may be realised. These same values form the epistemological underpinnings of action research. My view is that Physiotherapy requires a new epistemological base through action research to realise its capacity for new thinking and practices that are commensurable with the new discourses of good practice.

Research Questions

Focus of enquiry

The focus of my enquiry is how I can contribute to the development of new relational epistemologies in Physiotherapy undergraduate education that influence the development of professionals as reflective critical thinkers. I agree with Whitehead (1989) that practitioners can produce accounts of practice as they ask, 'How do I improve my practice?' I aim to create critically reflective spaces to enable student engagement with action research, to directly transfer into improvement of their clinical practice. I act from an understanding that if a Physiotherapist improves practice then they will contribute to the wellbeing of patients.

Methods

Research methods / mapping the literature

I gather qualitative and quantitative data using a range of methods, including reflective dialogue, interview, reflective journaling, observations and student assessments. The values of care and responsibility for the wellbeing of the other emerge as criteria and standards of judgement during my data analysis, to test my aspirations that my educational influence transforms into the competent practices of professionals. I encourage critical thinking and deconstruction of normative thinking (Satterly 1987) through engagement with a range of literatures grounded in different values orientations (see Fischer and Jennings 1981, and Müller and Carpendale 2000). To close the emerging critical loop necessitates contiguous discussion regarding teacher centred and student centred learning (Elen et al 2007)

Frame

Analytical and theoretical framework

In the 1980s Physiotherapists began to work autonomously, valuing practice-based knowledge, rather than depending on the knowledge of medical practitioners. This shift from medical-directed interventions offered students responsibility, challenge, and raised awareness that exercise of clinical judgement and informed interpretation could directly influence the quality of life experience of patients. Such practices reflect the core values of the profession. 'As a profession integral to health promotion, prevention, acute care and rehabilitation physiotherapy plays an essential role in the health care system' (Higgs, Refshauge and Ellis 2001: 79). However, this practice-based autonomy has not been accompanied by a dramatic change in methods of education, which remain staff- rather than student-centred. Despite being a contemporary profession, it would appear that Physiotherapy educators often take a didactic rather than an enquiry based approach. A new framework is needed (Thys 2003). My research aim is to contribute by working with the Physiotherapy educators of the future, and encouraging investigation into ways in which they can evaluate their practices through action research, integral to lifelong learning.

Research findings

Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge

My findings are about how I am contributing to knowledge of the field by influencing the professional learning of students, clinicians and educators as they engage with their action enquiries. I have found that exploring one's own practice is necessary and integral to the daily activity of qualified practitioners (McNiff and Whitehead 2006). My research has potential to contribute to a new knowledge base for Physiotherapy with implications for improving the quality of the profession by prioritising a values led approach to improve the experience of professionals and patients.