

Nursing students' experiences in developing a love for their vocation in China: implications for nursing educators

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Abstract: Objective: To determine how nursing students develop a love for nursing during the clinical practice session. **Background:** At present many Chinese hospitals are implementing the High Quality Nursing Care Demonstration Project, whose purpose is to improve nursing quality through human caring. Documenting nursing students' experiences during clinical rotation from their perspective and determining the key factors that contribute to their appreciation of their professional roles would help schools and hospitals make appropriate reformations to current clinical educational practices. **Method:** A qualitative approach using face-to-face, half-structured interviews was adopted to allow relevant data to emerge. Sixteen nursing students during their clinical rotation in one hospital in Shanghai, China took part in the research project. Data from all participants were analyzed via qualitative content and thematic analysis. **Results:** Three main themes emerged from these interviews. Students came to an appreciation and love of their role in nursing by thoroughly internalizing the core value of helping others through acquiring a sense of achievement, by understanding the importance of interpersonal relationships, and by gradually developing ability to maintain a professional demeanor in difficult circumstances. **Conclusions:** The professional love of nursing by students developed in a cyclical fashion, promoted by personal sense of achievement, good relationships with patients and staff, and gradually strengthening ability of coping stressors during the process of adapting to complex clinical settings. Psychological support from nursing educators and staff that is appropriate to various situations during different stages of the clinical rotation is suggested.

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Introduction

Caring has always been an important element in discussions of the distinctive character of the nursing profession (Morse et al. 1991; Martinsen 1989). In March 2010 the Chinese Ministry of Health implemented the High Quality Nursing Care Demonstration Project (Guo 2010) aimed at improving nursing quality and patients' satisfaction through humane caring. This project challenged nursing educators to nurture nursing students' sense of the moral aspects of patient care and their ability to sustain therapeutic nurse-client relationships.

This project demanded that more nurses in hospitals or centers of community healthcare internalize the values and understand the professional attitudes that sustain the dignity and respect shown to each client (Yuan & Li 2011). It also challenged nursing educators to improve teaching strategies, especially highlighting students' compassion and empathy, which are important features of the nursing professional attitude and may directly alter nurses' behaviors (Wu et al. 2002). Nurses' professional attitude of caring is founded on their emotional response to their profession, the activities of nursing including the learning of new skills, and enthusiasm for helping patients. This caring attitude is reflective

of their love of the job, sense of responsibilities, appreciation of their professional social status, and vocational commitment. (Wu et al. 1999).

Examining nursing students' experiences will identify for educators the key factors that influence the nurturing of a positive attitude toward nursing, then implement definite strategies for improving students' passion for the nursing profession.

Background

Necessity for a professional attitude study

Higher education in nursing has been developing for nearly thirty years in China. As in other countries, recruiting and retaining students is a challenging problem, especially in recent years. Some nursing scholars have pointed out that most nursing students do not form correct occupational attitudes and cannot commit to nursing as a long-life goal (Cai et al. 2011, Luo et al. 2005). Jiang et al. (2007) surveyed 450 nursing students and reported that 55.1% of them were full of confidence in the pursuit of nursing, 42.1% lacked confidence because they thought of nursing as menial labor, and 37 students (represented 8.2% of all respondents) wanted to leave the occupation someday. Major reasons for tending resignations included poor

chances for career advancement, low social status, heavy workload, and lack of respect or understanding of the profession (Liu & Wang 2009).

At present in China, many schools of nursing and hospitals are seeking approaches that will retain more nursing students to solve the nursing shortage, including nurturing students' professional enthusiasm by way of clinical rotation programs or emotional understanding in classes (Jiang et al. 2007).

Importance of clinical placement for encouraging professional commitment

Clinical placement is an essential component of learning (National Review of Nursing Education 2002). It exerts considerable influence on the way in which students are socialized into the profession (Holland 1993) and develops, consolidates their understanding of nursing (Parr and Green 2002). It is within this environment that students develop their attitudes, competence, interpersonal communication skills, critical thinking, and clinical problem-solving abilities (Dunn and Hansford 1997). In a Swiss study, Thorell-Ekstrand and Bjorvell (1995) suggested that clinical placement provides the student optimal opportunities to observe role models, to gain hands-on practice, and to reflect upon what is seen, heard, sensed, and done.

Brown et al. (2008) studied nursing students' learning experiences on shaping their predispositions to work with older people through multiple methods, reinforced the vital role that the placement experience plays in helping students to identify with a particular area of practice. Students' idealized image of a nurse is often severely challenged when exposed to care that is less than perfect (Chan, 2004). The stark contrast between their initial image and reality may influence their satisfaction with their professional choice.

Factors influencing personal liking for the nursing profession on the part of nursing students

According to the research literature, factors that significantly influence liking for the nursing profession on the part of nursing students are indirect. These include principally the quality of staff-student relationships, particularly between the mentor and the student (Dunn and Hansford 1997, Saarikoski and Leino-Kilpi 2002), the extent to which students are made to feel welcome on the ward and feel part of the medical staff (Young 1997, Nolan 2004), and the quality of student-patient relationships (Sword et al. 1994, Dunn and Hansford 1997). Nursing students' attitudes toward the profession also improved after participating in rescuing refugees after the earthquake in Wenchuan county, China, just because their senses of achievement improved (Lai et al. 2009).

Mentorship consists of three aspects: emotional support, career assistance, and role

modeling (Scott 2005). The latter is the most important. Research in Australia (Stockhausen 2005) revealed that students constructed a personal identity as a nurse through interactions with patients, nurses, and their own work. Poor student-patient relationships may lead to misunderstandings, frustrations, medical disputes, errors, and poor patient outcomes (Leonard et al. 2005; Meyer and Arnheim 2002), many cases happened in China during these years also verified the regretful outcomes which could be browsed on internet.

Among the communication skills used in nursing, communication associated with patient treatment is one of the most important (Swiny and Brady 2010). These include expressing support, providing information, giving feedback, giving patients hope, and helping them deal with anxiety (Elizabeth and Boggs 2006). In the clinical setting, most nursing students need to improve their treatment and interpersonal communication skills (Xie et al., 2012), as what they learn in classes is too theoretical for actual nursing practice (Frost et al. 1997).

It has been reported that nursing students have difficulties coping with emotional stressors (Tully 2004) and require counseling (Omigbodun et al. 2004). Seeking help is an effective coping skill (Rickwood et al. 2005), and the result of good staff-student relationships that provide students needed psychological support. Sense of achievement may be a link between good interpersonal relationships and satisfaction as a nurse. How nursing students experience a sense of achievement has seldom been studied.

Purpose of this study

Our study examined nursing students' clinical experiences to find key factors that influence their enthusiasm for nursing, so that schools of nursing may design new strategies to improve students' passion for the nursing profession and help hospitals take definite actions to retain more graduate nurses.

Research Approach

Study Design

An exploratory, descriptive design was used to investigate how nursing students develop enthusiasm for nursing, including factors that either promote or inhibit this development. The research paradigm for this qualitative study was naturalistic inquiry, which takes place in natural (uncontrived) settings to describe what occurs through an inductive strategy.

Sample and Setting

The purposive sample included 14 female and 2 male associate degree nursing students (total, n = 16) enrolled in a state university in Henan Province.

The students were undergoing their clinical rotation at one hospital in Shanghai City, China when they served as participant informants. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 23 years with a mean age of 21.18 years (SD 1.05). None of them had any clinical experience before coming to Shanghai, and none received payment nor were assessed a fee for participation in this study.

Ethical Considerations

This qualitative study was carried out from Dec, 2011 to Feb, 2012, after obtaining approval from the Research Ethical Committee of the participating school and all participants' informed consent. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and their decision to participate would have no effect on their grades. Each participant provided signed informed consent prior to each interview after a thorough explanation of the study.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were an open-ended, semi-structured interview (Berg 1989) schedule and a demographic data sheet, which allowed participants the greatest input in providing data for the study. The questions on the interview guide mainly concerned clinical rotation experiences such as feelings on learning and caring in different stages, key events affected their views on nursing. Both the interview schedule and demographic data sheet were pilot-tested for clarity, accuracy, and validity with two female volunteer senior baccalaureate nursing students.

Data Collection

Prior to the start of the initial interview, the interviewer contacted nursing students via telephone, appointed the time and place for face-to-face interview. Initial interviews were audiotaped and the time varied from 30 to 90 minutes. Each participant completed a brief demographic data sheet before interviews began. 16 students were interviewed when saturation of the data occurred till the end of the study. Data was collected for 2 months. Strict confidentiality was maintained of all data obtained in this study.

Data Analysis

To facilitate a systematic and verifiable process of data analysis, the researcher used qualitative content and thematic analysis. Transcribed interviews were reviewed, coded, and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. All codes were then compared and contrasted to discover evolving patterns and trends, in accordance with a prescribed, sequential process of analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1985). More abstract categories emerged as transcripts were reread. When analyzed simultaneously with previous categories, common links among ideas were

recognized. Themes that captured the essence of the phenomenon of students' professional satisfaction were identified.

Scientific Rigor

In this study, credibility was established by having the same investigator conduct all of the student interviews. Transferability standards were met by the appropriate description of rules used in the data analysis process and through the development of an audit trail to document decisions, choices, and insights. An organized system of records and files was maintained to strengthen the dependability and confirmability of the study, which preserved the quality of the evolving inquiry and enabled review of the research quality on completion.

Results

Nursing students' experiences of professional satisfaction were diverse and varied—their thoughts, feelings, and ideas were individualized and influenced by personal beliefs and values, past experiences, and anecdotal stories. To capture the essence of the interrelationship among ideas, 3 major themes were established.

Comprehension of the core professional value—to help others

All the participants described how, during clinical rotation, they gained a new understanding of the nursing profession and what it means to help others that differed from their school days. Most students told of complex feelings that were at times stressful, depressing, exciting, or joyous, beginning with their first contact with patients and nursing staff, to gradually becoming familiar with daily work and comprehending the significance of helping others. Two students commented:

*The patients appreciated what I did for them. Some patients were in so much pain that I was anguished for not being able to relieve their pain through my own means as fast as possible. Nursing means helping human beings recover from suffering.

*Our patients become better day by day, which is so satisfying to me and to them. It brings more meaning to my life to do all I can for them.

Some students spoke of their patients' appreciation for them during the third or fourth month of rotation. As they progressed in clinical knowledge and skills, they acquired praise from patients either verbally or in written evaluations as the rotation schedule ended. This influenced the value they attached to their profession and motivated them to learn all they needed to know as nurses. They commented:

* While working as an intern at outpatient

service, an old woman once came to me urgently asking for my help because she had lost her medical service card. I tried to dial the phone number more than ten times to help her. She was moved to cry. From that moment, my main objective has been to help my patients out of their troubles whenever I can.

* When people held my hand and said “you are such a kind girl”, this moved me very much and I no longer fretted over little disgraces or the bitterness I had suffered from.

Five students spoke of the examples set by their clinic instructors which enhanced their nursing values. One student’s statement:

* I saw the instructors’ wholehearted concern for the patients, and the head nurse went on ward rounds every day for information on the patients’ progress. I knew that I was meant to help these people by facing their illness with them, just as the superior nurses on the ward do.

Comprehend the importance of interpersonal communication in nursing practice

When nursing students were in the clinic, they dealt with patients, clinical instructors, doctors, nursing assistants, and other personnel. The quality of these relationships affected nursing students’ understanding of the nursing occupation and had an important influence on their enjoyment of the profession. Twelve students described their good relationships with patients, which played a part in their choice of future employment, and a sense of spiritual fulfillment which strengthened their passion for nursing. One student stated:

*The first patient I cared for was a woman with carcinoma of the head of the pancreas, who displayed signs of emotional instability throughout her hospital stay, and was always angry with others. I tried my best to take care of her, and at the last, she talked with me as to her daughter.

* I found that the daily routine work of nursing was dull during the first days, because I am not good at communicating with others. Later I tried to change my working style to listen to patients’ troubles and discover their potential needs. I found then that the dull daily work could also be interesting. Humanistic care is so important in our practice.

Some students ran into frustration during their communication practice and learned to reflect on their own faults, gradually achieving an objectivity and self-awareness that brought about far-reaching improvements in their vocational development. One student stated:

*I quarreled with a patient for the first and last

time through misunderstanding each other. Now I see that, indeed, such an event should not have happened if I had learned to deal with diverse people.

Another relationship that greatly affects student’s commitment to the nursing profession is the one they share with their instructors. Two students described different feelings about this relationship.

*I feel very happy to work with my clinical teachers. At times I feel I am a member of the nursing staff and share with them all the sweetness and sadness of working there. They taught me so many nursing skills that I like my job.

*Here the teachers care more about guide teaching. They can propose a question anytime and explain it clearly to me. I know I have a long way to go to be an outstanding nurse with excellent skills, solid knowledge, and to develop a strong commitment to be of service to people, toward which I will advance step-by-step.

Gradual strengthening of psychic flexibility to cope with stressors

In this study, the sixteen nursing students all spoke of their loneliness and difficulties in adapting to the new lifestyle during their first month, when for the first time they left their home town in North China and came to Shanghai in East China. In addition, they told of their frustrations at beginning clinical training, although they gradually became strong enough to face all challenges from complex clinical situations. They adopted various mental defenses, such as sublimation or displacement, or active coping strategies to keep themselves optimistic. These mechanisms strengthened their psychic flexibility. Peer support, the social expectations of their family and school that they would be retained in the training hospital, and the desire to be hired and independent fortified their motivation to strive for success in the profession of nursing. According to the students:

*Whenever I had a moment to rest, I became very homesick and wished for a long holiday to go home. However, my mission to study could not allow me to do so, and I clearly understood that I should study here.

*Initially I poured out my heart to my classmates to share my fear and restlessness because of the strange hospital setting and my feelings of inferiority and frustration, since I was always behind them in nursing technique. Every time I gained encouragement from them, analyzing my advantages after my complaints.

*When the second month began, I found that the instructor didn’t think highly of me and I

was depressed for two days. Soon I began to change my mood, became more diligent and serious, and later I had many chances to acquire more technique.

* We were chosen to come to this hospital and represent our school, and cherished the chance to study here. We knew our mission was to behave better, to be retained here, and build up an ideal image for our schoolmates; that is one of our driving forces to study hard.

Most nursing students repeated phrases such as “become stronger”, “stand up again from tears”, “feeling of responsibility”. These phrases demonstrated that their emotional maturity, understanding of the nursing vocation, and psychic ability to cope with stress was strengthened, and professional satisfaction was promoted.

Limitations

This study is limited by the fairly homogeneous group of participants. Extending the study with a more diverse group of nursing students would be beneficial for further exploring the developmental process of gaining professional satisfaction and commitment and the factors that influence this development. For future research, using additional methods of data collection such as surveys containing scales for measuring professional satisfaction or beliefs regarding nursing would help illuminate this complex phenomenon even further.

Discussion

Analysis of this study’s data indicates that there were three dimensions or themes pertaining to these Chinese nursing students’ feelings about their profession. These themes consisted of 1) professional values based on cognitive and emotional experiences, 2) interactions with patients and medical staff, and 3) personal growth through psychic flexibility. Elements of their experience in clinical rotation are shared by American and Canadian nursing students (Moscaritolo 2009, Stochhausen & Sturt 2005, Day 2005) such as unfamiliarity with the clinical setting, and the need to pay more attention to creating optimal relationships with patients, the medical staff, instructors, and others. Because of differences in cultural background and current nursing educational models between China and other countries, there are some special aspects indicated by this study that are specific to Chinese students, and this carries implications for nursing clinical educators in China.

In the initial period from the first to second month of clinical rotation, nursing students experienced confusion, loneliness, and a sense of isolation from the nursing staff. By the middle period (from the third to fourth month), they began to show individualized expressions of depression, happiness,

a sense of achievement, or excitement due to differences in personalities, clinical situations, and professional foundations of knowledge and skills learned in classes. During this stage, most nursing students began to serve patients for the first time and obtained feedback from patients and clinical instructors which were very important in shaping their professional values.

In general, values are learned, arise from personal experience, form a basis for behavior, and are evidenced in a consistent behavior pattern (Eddy et al. 1994). During the last stage of their clinical learning program, the nursing students experienced a passion or willingness to commit to a nursing vocation. Schank and Weis (2001) proposed that the development of professional values occurs along a continuum, beginning with professional nursing education and continuing throughout the years of nursing practice. The findings of the present study indicate that the development of a love of nursing, as well as the internalization of vocational values, occurs in a cyclical pattern. Clinical nursing educators may well note that nursing students require emotional support according to individual needs and at different periods as their regard for the profession develops.

For example, during the latter period, clinical nursing staff, instructors, and nursing administrators may guide students’ planning for professional development. It deserves to be noted that training in psychic flexibility should be a component throughout the entire rotational period to enhance nursing students’ professional confidence as they overcome each frustration. In addition, participants in this study offered many more details of their relationships with patients than with others, for their clinical experiences were centered mostly around dealing with patients, which is considered essential by the hospital in training nursing students’ communication skills.

Successful nursing experiences may be the most important factor in promoting the students’ devotion to the nursing vocation. When nurses are able to empathize with their patients, they are often better at assessing their patients’ needs. Encouragement and emotional support from clinical instructors increases nursing students’ confidence and independence, and creates a sense of belonging. In addition, nursing educators may give immediate positive feedback to students for each sign of progress, encouraging them to live up to their full potential. Hart and Rotem (1994) asserted that the culture of the workplace was essential in establishing the value of the learning experience for students. Students appreciate opportunities for autonomy and increased responsibility, and feedback from the ward

staff.

In the present study we found that the clinical environment was very stressful to nursing students. Their abilities to adapt and face new challenges optimistically during clinical rotation were strengthened gradually through complex emotional experiences such as frustration, failure, and success, and developing various psychic coping styles. Psychological support is an important contributor to student retention, provided by the caring atmosphere of a mentoring relationship (Shelton 2003) and support from classmates, instructors, and even doctors. Nursing students may be trained to seek normative means of emotional support to nurture their psychic flexibility and love of their profession.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, there are three dimensions to the advancement of nursing students' love for the profession of nursing in China, including comprehending the core professional value of helping others, emphasis on interactions with patients and clinical instructors, and strengthening personal psychic flexibility. Clinical nursing education reform may focus on these three key dimensions or factors to influence nursing students' satisfaction with their vocation.

The discovery that the nursing student undergoes a process of development toward professional satisfaction and commitment also provides insight into how nursing students manage the demands of adapting to new clinical settings, and a new awareness of the stressful nature of clinical experiences. Nurse educators and administrators need to take measures to bridge the gap between beginning students' ideals and aspirations and the mature development of their technical and emotional skills, by ameliorating the current clinical teaching mindset and systems.

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